

André Gide on the Soviet Union

The famous Frenchman's need for jumping to opposites may explain his indiscipline

By Paul Nizan

IN his little book, *Return from the U.S.S.R.*, André Gide sought to define the politics, the culture, and the folkways of 170 million people.

It is astounding that Gide, who supported his opinions on the Congo timber companies by such prudent factual verification, should so hastily hand down a verdict against the Soviet Union which puts it somewhat below Hitler Germany.

Are we to believe that Gide obeyed that famous "diversity of sentiment which forces me, once having finished a book, to leap to the opposite extreme of myself (through a need for balance) and write precisely that which is least capable of pleasing the readers won for me by the preceding work?"

We can quite well understand the value of paradoxes and what they contribute to the fine arts; but I find it more difficult to understand their value for a political writer, as Gide, whether he so desired it or not, has become.

"The U.S.S.R.," writes Gide, "is in 'construction,' and this should be repeated constantly."

A correct analysis would have required Gide to remember that the U.S.S.R. is a changing world—but he forgets this in almost every page and describes the U.S.S.R. as a world which no longer changes, where everything has been completed, where history is at an end.

Neither was psychology the best avenue of approach. This is the least reliable of the sciences, especially when it does not base itself upon objective data. And psychology requires a patience and leisure seldom at the disposal of the visitor. In this respect, Gide is not on solid ground.

"Only psychological questions are within my grasp," he writes. Agreed. But he should not then proceed to render psychological verdicts on this "forest" of social questions in which Gide himself feels that he is lost—in which he did lose himself. He says further: "Economic questions are beyond my abilities." True. But they are not beyond his ambitions. For he passes judgment on economic and social questions after extremely hasty psychological inquiries, which omit the peculiarities, the diversity, the varied psychological "epochs" of a country where they are more numerous than anywhere else.

THIS FAILURE of Gide's method becomes evident when he undertakes to resolve the problem of Soviet trade or productivity of labor. He deplores the lack of taste in most Soviet manufactured goods, explicable by the difficulty of rapidly organizing a highly skilled

group of producers, the delay in achieving satisfactory collaboration between engineer and planner, the requirements of mass production at particular stages.

Similarly, it is not enough to use some classical notions of Russian literature for interpreting certain phases of Soviet life. To explain the problems of labor productivity by "Russian indolence" is to disregard all the real elements involved in the problem of training skilled workers or the technical backwardness of the unskilled. Gide might have found a rigorous explanation of this question in a famous article by Lenin on labor productivity. Let us not confuse the *Oblomovschina* of the '40s with the state of Russian economy before the October Revolution.

Gide's psychological assertions are hardly proven. His example of the Soviet "superiority complex" sums up the matter. Recourse to Gogol-like boasting, in that modern garb, the superiority complex, does not explain facts, and does not give one the right to generalize, especially when the facts are taken from the lives of children. It is quite true, of course, that Soviet citizens often boast. They have a right to boast, considering what had to be done and what they have already done. But Soviet citizens scorn the foreigner far less than Gide imagines. Different experiences might just as well have brought him to the conclusion that the Russians suffer from an inferiority complex. But Gide explains boasting, which he prefers to consider general, by the systematic keeping of the Soviet citizen in ignorance of foreign events. He claims that the Soviet people were not told about the Paris subway and could thus boast about their own.

But what are the actual facts? The wall newspapers of Moscow were for many months full of stories, photographs, and sketches of the foreign subways; the whole of Moscow knew that the builders of their subways were experimenting on the four branches of the Sokolniki line with the methods employed in the subways of Paris, London, New York, and Berlin.

Very excellent Soviet newspapers inform the public on foreign events, *Za Rubezhom*, *Vokrug Tsvet*, and others, not to speak of the technical magazines in which one reads only about Detroit, Billancourt, etc., and the books which are being translated. Indeed, the Russians not only translate Aragon and André Gide, but also reactionaries like Francois Mauriac and Drieu la Rochelle.

All of this seems of serious import to me, since it is a question of proving facts, and Gide's "facts" are false or incomplete.

No one doubts that Gide met ignorant persons. But M. Jacques Bardoux, of the French Institute, once wrote that New York is the capital of the United States, and André Gide himself writes that Bolshevo was founded on the initiative of Gorky six years ago—both the "fact" and the date are wrong.

It is true that success sometimes intoxicates Soviet citizens when they compare the terrible past of their country with its present. Gide fails to make this necessary comparison because he is concerned less with historical perspectives than with geographical analogies. But it was not Gide who gave the first warning signal. "Superiority complex" in contemporary Russian is known as "dizziness from success," a phrase coined by Stalin.

NOT EVERYTHING in Gide's book is false, but almost everything is badly interpreted through a lack of real knowledge. It is true that there are some poor people in the U.S.S.R., but there are far less of them than in 1933. Gide should have given up an hour with the souls of men and spent it with statistics. It is still true that Soviet civilization is hard and that many people there lack the philanthropic spirit. But how can Gide, who appeals so glibly to the history of revolutionary Russia, neglect to consider that history when it is a question of defining one of its struggles?

Again, it was not Gide who brought attention to this fact. It was Stalin who told the following story to show that the heritage of callousness had to be overcome: One day in Siberia peasants, floating logs, let a man drown without trying to save him. They later said to Stalin, then in exile: "If it had been a



Arthur Getz

horse. . . . But a man! . . . A man can be made again, but you can't make a horse. . . ."

These mistakes in perspective lie at the heart of the verdict on "conformism" and the "Stalin dictatorship."

I have no doubt that Gide met cowards, perfectly base and sordid people. I myself know some. I can tell you their names. And the stories of the *svetlie sovietskie* and the *Torgsin* babies. I know them too. Better than Gide does. I am not impressed by the details about a "new" bourgeoisie; it is the old one defending itself. The Trotskyites say it is inconceivable that if the kulaks are liquidated as a class, as we say, they should still be fought individually. Did Gide see one evening in the Ukraine the anger of the team harvesters who discovered that a "de-kulaked" kulak in their midst had spilled gasoline into their soup?

The fight is not yet over. One of the forms of battle is the series of small offensives of the wives of engineers, of writers who dream of Paris, people like the sabotaging engineer who dreamed of the White Sea canal and said:

"I'm going to send my girls to be educated in the West. . . . There is still nothing like education in the West. . . ."

At the Seventeenth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, one of the objectives assigned to the Second Five-Year Plan was the liquidation of the vestiges of capitalism in the minds of men. These cannot die in a day; they take on disguises; they proclaim loudly that Stalin is truly the "leader and the teacher of the peoples," and make foreign writers on a trip use exceptionally polite forms of expression. . . .

We must not take old branches for young sprouts, the survivals for the new. Nor must we confuse conformism with membership. I wonder if the real reason for *Return from the U.S.S.R.* does not rest on this question raised by Gide, which is a serious one because it concerns the very existence of the writer:

"I believe," Gide says, "that the worth of a writer is linked to the revolutionary forces which animate him, or more exactly (as I am not foolish enough to recognize artistic worth only in writers of the Left) in his oppositional force. . . ."

The problem is posed with apparent rigor. But Gide, like almost everybody else, means by conformism all the *outer* forms of membership. A true conformist is a man who, in his acts and in his words, conforms to the values of a society with which he disagrees. He is therefore lying. When Descartes declared his conformity with the Catholic religion, there is no doubt he was lying. But you can make no one believe that Sophocles, Racine, and Thomas Aquinas lied. They did not conform:

they were members, members of the civilizations of Athens, of the monarchy of Louis XIV, of the Church of Rome.

Gide met conformists and members in the U.S.S.R. Babel, Sholokhov are members. O. . . ., V. . . . are conformists. Membership is an affirmation of the man; the values which he defends are identical with his life. The

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Newsreel

II Duce—standing before the statue of Cæsar—

Arm thrust sunward over the passing troops,
Casts a bronze shadow.

And the day is late:
Night piles eastward and the hours descend
Heavy with marching thousands; stone
Beating under boots; the squadron planes
fill and
Refill the sky, circling round that hand
Even until dark: the spinning roar of doom
Gathering across the stars.

The legions still
Pass: into the matrix of spotlights, out
and on—

The edges of earth thunder—and the rigid
arm
Blazes with electric glare; the hand fierce,
the eyes
Afire on the frowning head: light of power
poured
Down on the lashed axes, the swastika,
the skulls
Nailed to the fiery crosses.

The night rocks
With tanks that roll into the bowl of
light; the sky
Screams.

And Cæsar of old of antique bronze
Black with two thousand years of Roman
rain,
Charred with the sun: now in the night
bearing
Kilowatt light on the carved toga restored
—casts
Before him a restless shadow whose up-
raised arm
Is belted with power; a helmeted monster
Growing from shade into strident flesh that
sends
Sound of its feet through mountains.

So this
Was the dream. This was the dream born,
on the cold
Hard smile that now need fear not even
the Ides,
As the lips dried to a centered carelessness
there
On the Senate floor beneath the muffling
robe.

WINFIELD TOWNLEY SCOTT.

conformist pretends to defend the present values, though he really prefers those of the past. Here, too, Gide's psychological inquiry was not sufficiently inclusive.

As to Gide's anguish on the worth of art founded on membership, are not Sophocles and Racine enough to reassure André Gide? He fears that there will be applause for "revolutionary banalities." I regret that he did not hear Boris Pasternak read his poems, which are far from easy to grasp, to a group of 1500 workers. We of the West live in a society in which greatness consists of saying *no*. We must finally decide not to attach eternally the destiny of art to misfortune. We must proclaim that there is a greatness which consists of saying *yes*.

THE EXAMPLE of Gide convinces me how difficult it is to say *yes*. Against the stream in bourgeois society, Gide still feels impelled to remain against the stream in Soviet society. The worst of "conformisms" seems to me to be this fashion today, which consists of blushing at not conforming to the non-conformism of the liberal intellectual or the Trotskyist cleric. The unfortunate thing is that this steers one in the direction of the bourgeois stream. The only consistent outcome of the total refusal of membership is silence. Gide speaks.

I understand well that the "permanent revolution" ravishes many of our intellectuals. They are inclined to believe that the true revolutionary is only concerned with ceaselessly surpassing himself, that there is no pause. This idea of the writer is foreign to the builder.

When a Soviet citizen, who does not "conform" to life because he "belongs" to it, shouts "Long live Stalin!" he signifies thereby that he prefers the construction now going on, to the hypothetical constructions; the real revolution to the "permanent revolution." That shout says that the U.S.S.R. has been saved by the opening of the period of the plans, of industrialization and the collectivization of the land. The chatterers had spoken for five years; Stalin was simply the man who set the works going—in spite of them.

I do not believe that Gide has come to a definite conclusion. His reactions seem to me less "Trotskyite" than "liberal." This unprejudiced approach is more prejudiced than one would believe. There is a curious prejudice in the following sentence, perhaps the most disquieting in Gide's book:

"Then I think (in spite of my anti-capitalism) of all those among us, from the great industrialist to the small shopkeeper, who torture their minds and strive forward. . . ."

It was prejudice also, but more candid than perverse, which let pass without noticing it the following sentence, which will henceforth be famous:

"For this remains acquired. There is no longer in the U.S.S.R. the exploitation of the greatest number for the profit of a few. This is enormous."

But who ever asked more as a beginning?



Joe Bartlett