Memoirs Of A Dutiful (Red) Daughter

Amirah Inglis

November 7 marks the seventieth anniversary of the revolution which established the world's first socialist country. Amirah Inglis recalls the imagery and iconography of the Soviet Union, as it entered the darkest days of stalinism, from a communist childhood in the 1930s.

I have seen the future and it works” exulted American reforming journalist Lincoln Steffens as early as 1919 on his second visit to Soviet Russia, spreading the excitement to radicals and socialists throughout the world. Australia was no exception. From 1918, pamphlets published in London, New York and locally were to be bought in bookshops in Melbourne and Sydney.


The Communist Party, in 1927, published Facts About Soviet Russia—the first of many with that title—by Clarice Irwin and a Melbourne man, Harry E. Langridge. In 1928, privately published eleven articles by the famous American novelist Theodore Dreiser; articles which had already been published in the Sydney Sun and the Melbourne Labour Call.

When Lenin died, the red flag flew from the Melbourne Trades Hall and a memorial service was held in the Sydney Domain; each Labor Council marked the loss, in a resolution, the Sydney one ending with these words:

(Leon) vigorously maintained a working class state, which in itself is a beacon light to the workers of the world.

The lines between radicals were not yet sharply drawn. Labor Councils talked like that and the diversity of information about the Soviet Union was great. Frank Anstey’s Red Europe and Leon Trotsky’s History of the Russian Revolution and were sold and read by the same people.

But in the thirties there was a significant change of attitude among communists. The Soviet Union was not only “the Socialist Fatherland of the International Proletariat”, its achievements a beacon, its defence an obligation, but, by the end of the decade, this Fatherland could do no wrong, had no faults and any criticism of any of its policies amounted to sacrilege. It was to remain like this for the next 20 years.

Many people not brought up as I was will ask, why did we not...
compare the life around us with the vision that we gained from books? How is it possible that Australians could have been so misled by half truths (or lies), so willing to be dazzled by the light of the beacon that, like kangaroos on country roads, they failed to see the car behind the lights? I clearly had a taste for romance and visions of a perfect future, but many more tough-minded people than me shared the visions. I know that people who would change the world are prone to a belief in the millennium; it would be too hard altogether to take on something so obviously and deeply entrenched as a whole social system unless one had a vision to travel by. The harder the task, the more necessary the millennial vision.

I was a child in the 'thirties, of communist parents not long arrived from Europe and active in what they called "the movement". The earliest political education I received about Soviet Russia came through songs and stories. There was a strong radical and socialist tradition of songs which came to Australia from Britain and the United States, so that I grew up singing the Wobbly* songs Long Haired Preachers and Halleluyah I'm a Bum, together with March of the Workers, The Red Flag and The Internationale.

These were songs of the old Socialist Song Books produced by the socialist parties. Their song The Red Flag was the best known and most popular radical hymn in Australia. So much so that in the early 'thirties the Workers Weekly, which described itself as "the official organ of the Communist Party of Australia and of the Australian section of the Communist International" published the words of The Internationale because it wanted it to become as well known as The Red Flag, the anthem of the non-communist left — those whom the Workers Weekly was now attacking as "social fascists".

Other songs were introduced to Australia as communists returned from Comintern meetings and Comintern schools. Thus, at home we sang Bandiera Rossa, Warszawianka (which we called Whirlwinds of Danger), and songs about the Soviet Union. Later, songs came back from Spain.

What did I learn about the Soviet Union from the songs we sang? From the beginning, the Soviet Union had a dual role: as the model of a socialist society and as the leader of communist parties throughout the world. The Internationale which we sang so lustily was both the national anthem of the USSR and the revolutionary anthem of the world's communist parties.

The Soviet Union, as leader of the revolutionary movement, was the main theme of the songs we sang in the early part of the 'thirties. The headquarters of the Comintern was in Moscow and its anthem was sung world wide.

The Comintern Song

Arise, fellow workers, march forward to battle,
March forward to battle, march shoulder to shoulder.
Look well to your rifles and fill them with lead,
To battle you workers for freedom and bread. (Repeat)

With hammer and sickle, in Bolshevik manner
We march with the Soviets, beneath the Red Banner,
We fear not the Fascists, the terrors of hell.
The workers are rising, the world will rebel. (Repeat)

In Leninist teachings, our glorious beacon,
On with the struggle, we never shall weaken,
To battle ye workers, for freedom and bread
Our slogan — ye workers of all lands unite. (Repeat)

Sovietland was the best known Soviet song in Australia. It was sung by communists with the fervour of a national anthem:

Sovietland so dear to every toiler
Peace and progress build their hopes on thee,
There's no other land the whole world over,
Where man walks the earth so proud and free. (Repeat)

From great Moscow to the farthest border,
From our Arctic seas to Samarkand,
Every worker freely and boldly,
As the Volga's ample waters flow,
Everywhere our old with honour go.

CHORUS

Day by day our happy land advances,
No one else on earth so free from shadows,
No one else so free to laugh and love.
But if any foes should try to smash us,
Like the thunder, like the sudden lightning,
We shall give our answer sharp and clear.

Apart from songs, my earliest sources of information and inspiration about the USSR came from stories, pictures and travellers' tales. I was well provided with all three because my parents were both members of what we called Fosyu which, I found later was the Friends of the Soviet Union (FOSU).

Throughout the 'thirties, every political argument revolved around Russia. "Why doesn't the Honourable Member go to Russia to live?" heckled an opponent of Eddie Ward, the Labor member for East Sydney, in 1932. "If I were a younger man I would go to Russia, so anxious am I to obtain first-hand information of the greatest experiment that has ever been attempted in the history of civilisation," said Dr. Moloney, a member for Melbourne, in the same debate.

The Friends of the Soviet Union was formed in 1930, first in Sydney and later in Melbourne (as was the pattern even then) and aimed to cement friendship "between workers and sympathisers of Australia and the workers and peasants of the USSR". But it also had a clear revolutionary purpose. "Join the Friends of the Soviet Union! Become an active worker in the cause of the emancipation of the world's workers along the lines adopted by the workers of the Soviet Union" called the first number of The Soviets Today, "official organ of the
and collected a crowd of observers, down again, amid cheers. The police, culprit, stopped him and climbed up the side of the ship until to leave, the excitement grew on the USSR for its May Day celebration.

As the first group of Australians travelling publicly to the Soviet Union, they were made much of by the Workers Weekly and Soviets Today and given good coverage, too, by the Melbourne Argus. All three reported their farewell gathering in Temperance Hall where the delegation was charged “with the task of securing for us full information concerning the progress of the workers and peasants of the Soviet Union and the form of government making this progress possible. We desire this information in order to guide us in the class struggle before us and in the task of Socialist construction with which we, too, will be faced”.

They also reported the amazing demonstration at the side of the RMS Orsova on the day of departure when 200 (The Argus) or 2000 (The Soviets Today) raised banners, sang The Red Flag and The Internationale and collected a crowd of observers, some hostile. As the ship was about to leave, the excitement grew on the pier and when one of the passengers hugging over the rail of the Orsova started to throw dirt down onto the singing demonstrators, six of them climbed up the side of the ship until they reached the boat deck, found the culprit, stopped him and climbed down again, amid cheers. The police, who had been called, questioned a couple, then let them go.

I must have been there to farewell my father and I wish I could say that I remember the scene, but I’m sorry to say that I can’t.

I was a child, seven years old when my father returned from the USSR. I didn’t read pamphlets or go to lectures, though we did have some at our house. But my father had returned with the agency for Mezhdunarodnaya Kniga, which meant International Books. Our house was soon full of Moscow News, USSR in Construction and books in English for children published by the Co-operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the USSR. The books I remember best were The Moscow Theatre for Children, Moscow Has A Plan and Red Comet by Geoffrey Trease — who was later to become a famous writer of historical novels for children.

USSR in Construction, published in four languages by the State Publishing House of the RSFR (the Russian Republic) was the photo-journalist magazine which must have formed many people’s image of the Soviet Union in the thirties as it did mine.

Photo-journalism was brand-new and USSR in Construction which was first published in 1930 was the first of its kind to be seen in Australia. Less technically excellent and less sophisticated than the later Life (1936) from the US, or Picture Post (1938) from Britain, it was the paper equivalent of the newsreels which were then also new.

The great difference was that it told about a country never seen on newsreels, a country where factory workers, miners and peasants were treated like the film stars or society ladies of capitalist countries. It bubbled with optimism and in the very early issues did not give the date in the conventional way, after the birth of Christ, but, like the French Jacobins proclaimed, “the thirteenth year of the revolution”.

By 1938, the language, like the architecture, had gone from plain to pompous, so that the year was given in Roman numerals, and the revolution became The Great October Socialist Revolution.

I was never short of books and magazines from Russia, or about Russia, and they were among my favourite reading. Martin Lawrence, the British CP publisher (which became Lawrence and Wishart in 1937), brought out two books which, with Geoffrey Trease’s Red Comet and the large monthly numbers of USSR in Construction were the greatest literary political influences on my young life. From about the age of 10 The Red Corner Book (London, n.d. but probably 1934) and Martin’s Annual (London 1934) were my beacon light, my bible stories and my Girls’ Own Annual.

The Red Corner Book, wrote its editor, “endeavours to spur children’s minds to the real issues life holds out — instead of drugging them with false glamour over ugly things. Two great forces are in conflict: they have children in their grip”. In a clever comic strip form, of 33 neat catchy little verses, accompanied by illustrations, these forces were demonstrated:

See this fat man
Who knows no need
Grabs all he can
He’s full of greed.

The fat man has a large house, a limousine, guzzles chicken washed down with champagne. On the other hand, there is the worker and a vivid account of working class families in depression England with priests, police and teachers keeping everyone in his place.

But look here!
Russia is the first great land
Where bosses and loungers have all been banned.
A land of the working class victorious,
Where a worker’s life is free and glorious.
For it was Lenin that great man
Who showed how it could be done.

The schools, like the country, worked to a plan as children learnt:
How to help the weaker brother
How to work for one another.
And there were the pioneer camps in the summer where everyone did his share of the work and reaped his share of the fun.

Working all unitedly
Me for you, and you for me,
Swiftly comes the great new life,
Peace and calm, an end to strife.
It was a Utopian vision. It was meant for children and it was very effective. About 40 years later, when I re-read these books in the British Museum, I found that I had remembered almost everything in them.

Like the Young Travellers series of today, the Red Comet was an educational travelogue but it was also political and the youthful reader took in the political lessons along with facts and figures in the lively descriptions of exotic scenery and Soviet life seen through the eyes of an English sister and brother, Joy and Peter, workers' kids from a town in Lancashire where there are no jobs for them. They get mixed up with a mechanic who has designed and built a revolutionary short take-off and land aircraft — Red Comet — with money he won on the pools, but who can't get any capitalist firm or the government to take an interest in it. Through a pal who is working in Moscow, he receives an invitation to take his machine there for a trial. Peter and Joy go too, and it is this device that enables Trease to take us on a flying tour of the USSR in 1935.

As they travel throughout the country, Trease describes all those scenes of Soviet life which I was seeing in pictures in USSR in Construction. The kids notice first that the red flag “the flag of the hunger marches”, they remark, here flies on all the public buildings. “Farm hands and factory workers, they're the chaps who run things here” says the pal who is working in Moscow. They pick up a young Russian girl and, with her help, begin to see that St. Basil's Cathedral is old, ugly and grotesque, while Lenin's tomb, with its clean, spare lines is beautiful. Joy is delighted to see women taxi drivers and women tram drivers and she hears of the first woman sea captain. Workers flats are going up all around. It is “the Plan” they are told, and it will make Moscow a wonder city. “Come back in ten years”, their young guide boasts “and see it!” It was infectiously exciting and uplifting. I was ten or eleven, I suppose. In particular, I loved the Parks of Culture and Rest, the Pioneer Palaces and Pioneer camps (I was an only child) — of which

Artrek was the best example — places where socialist principles were put into action: the model later for communist, EYI and Junior League camps.

In the values it espoused and the basic information that it contained this children's literature was providing me with a communist education. And I have the impression that, despite the almost 200 political books on the banned list between 1932-1937, there was a very large amount of material available in Australia about the USSR one way and another. When you add to the Communist Party and FOSU publications, Proletariat, the magazine of the Melbourne University Labor Club, Labor Call, trade unions papers, books published by the Left Book Club, the journals and pamphlets published in the USSR and sold through various bookshops, the sheer amount of published information about the USSR was prodigious. It was also impressively cheap. Soviets Today cost 3d. a copy, Workers Weekly and many pamphlets cost 1d., Moscow News 3d., Imprecorr 2d. The dearest was USSR in Construction at 3/- an issue, but that was more like a book. It was possible for a worker, so inclined, to collect a large library of information about the USSR.

In the early 'thirties, the tone of many of these publications was angry, sectarian and didactic as communists used that Comintern pidgin which clearly marked them off from all other radical Australians. Moscow News spoke in the original Bolshevik voice that all communists tried to emulate, and its layout was of whole broadsheet pages of closely printed type, occasionally broken by ringing headlines. I did not, at 11 or 12, pore over this publication nor, I suspect, did many adult Australians who bought it, perhaps even including my Latin teacher to whom I took a copy each week as part of my mother's paper round. Though I should add that there were many more pages of more palatable, though poorly printed, items with pictures.

There was no unemployment in the USSR and this was stunning enough but, on top of this, was the excitement of growth, of size of the new, and the energy of the builders. The sense of building the future and the joy of labour; the excitement of socialist construction, of large-scale industrial development in the USSR may be difficult to comprehend today, but it formed a large part of the appeal of the USSR in the 1930s. Great names like Magnitogorsk (giant of steel in the Urals, biggest in the world!), Dniepostroi, the world's greatest power station, and the Metro were featured so often in communist information that they became household words. You didn’t have to swallow great slabs of indigestible theoretical material to reach it: pictures, headlines and figures told an immediate story. “All Moscow is building the Metro!” called a Workers Weekly headline in July 1934, and Intourist urged foreigners to come and see this socialist symbol, with stations that were palaces for the people.

Not only were tractors, power stations, oil wells and underground stations being built, but new worlds were opening out before ordinary people: new social arrangements tried, everything was new and everything excellent!

All these Soviet achievements belonged, it was always made clear, not only to the Soviet people, they belonged to us as well, to the whole “international proletariat”, but especially to those who were communists and sympathisers. In far off Australia we thrilled with pride at the achievements and, as they belonged to us, we were adjured to help defend them against traitors.
from within and imperialist enemies from without, who were ever poised to attack. Part of that defence was almost never to allow, in any publication over which the Communist Party had control, that any fault existed and then only after it no longer did: so that those of us who read nothing else about the USSR — like readers of motoring writers today — never realised that the earlier models had any faults until the new ones came onto the market.

After Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933 and the USSR joined the League of Nations in 1934, the passionate voice of its Foreign Minister Maxim Litvinov was heard at League meetings and reported in full in the pages of Moscow News and Australian communist publications. The combination of the war-like fascist countries, Italy and Germany, and their intervention in the Spanish Civil War brought real danger of fascist aggression and turned the policy of the communist parties towards a united front in a defence of the Soviet Union, not as the homeland of the revolutionary movement, but as the bulwark of world peace. World revolution became less important than world peace and Soviet foreign policy more important than domestic achievements; the strength of the Red Army even more compelling.

The fight for collective security, the Czech crisis, the Russo-German pact, the outbreak of war in September 1939, all look to a different period in my childhood. The thirties were over, the depression had given way to war, a new era had begun.

And that is another story.

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The Future For The Left ...

by Jade Bull

Where the planets are in November/December (and a word of warning about January)

Probably the most significant influence is Pluto in the sign Scorpio. Pluto represents both the reforming and destroying urges. Could this hidden and mysterious planet (ruled by Hades, the God of the underworld) have been responsible for the delvings of the Fitzgerald Inquiry into police corruption in Queensland? Certainly, the simultaneous existence of Venus semi-square to Neptune at the time of writing (late September) suggests a strong linkage between crime, government and (for some reason) transport.

Likewise, Al Grassby’s Leo ascendant makes him particularly vulnerable, at this point in time, to unfortunate and unwanted legal matters. (Al, be warned, this aspect also will seriously aggravate your problems with dress-sense!!)

Could the deceptive influence of Neptune in Capricorn, the sign of structure, control and government, be the source of Ewart Smith’s startling discovery of the legislative faults in the ID Card Bill? (The astrologers would also welcome info on the time and place of birth of the magpies.)

On the subject of federal government stuff-ups (we are trying to avoid unspeakable left jargon), the position of Jupiter (the planet of fortunes and finances) in Aries suggests that Comrade Keating may well have to redo his budgetary calculations on the basis of the untimely intervention of Neptune on the magpies.
Prominent Upcoming Political Birthdays

SAGITTARIUS
November 23 - December 21

Sagittarians
Charles de Gaulle, 22/11
Billy the Kid, 23/11
Walt Disney, 5/12
R.J.L. Hawke, 9/12
Bhagavan Shree Rajneesh, 12/12
Frank Sinatra, 12/12
Jimmy Carter, 13/12 (it was a Friday as well)
Louisa May Alcott, 17/12

The sun in this sign denotes an extroverted personality, who is fond of outdoors, sports and travel; your motto might well be "don't fence me in". (Or, in the case of Jimmy Carter, "Let my people go")

A Reading from the past: Leon Trotsky

For our first "reading from the past", we have picked (sic) Leon Trotsky, one of the left's best-known Scorpios.

Born at 10 pm on November 8, 1879, at Yanovka in the Ukrainian Province of Kherson, Lev Davydovich Bronstein was destined to a life of controversy and radical political involvement.

The fact that Trotsky was born with his sun square to his moon gives us two invaluable insights into his character; first, that his parents were in conflict at the time of his conception and, second, that his ego would perpetually be in conflict with his emotions.

With a Scorpio square to his ascendant Leo, Trotsky was destined to experience a long history of bitter interpersonal conflict. (see, for example, his bitter struggles with Zinoviev and Bukharin at the Third Congress of the International in 1921. Likewise, the series of violent diatribes between Trotsky and his Red Guard barber, Igor Stakowski.)

On the positive side, Trotsky's Sun in opposition to his Mars gave him an argumentative and eloquent determination.

A Note for January

January/February 1988 sees Saturn conjoin with the galactic apex. Saturn, a powerful ruling planet, last entered this position some 58 years ago, at the time of the Wall Street Crash and the onset of the Great Depression. Bad news for those with a large (albeit ethical) portfolio, and good news for those who have been waiting for so long for the next BIG crisis of Capitalism.

Coming soon...

Venus in Aquarius: Epistemological ruptures for the post-structuralists?
Uranus in Sagittarius: the Archer's arrow strikes suddenly?
Stalin for astrologers and notable Aquarians ad nauseam...

JADE BULL is a Sagittarian.