Chapter IX

INDUSTRIAL MILITARIZATION

THE Ninth Congress of the All-Russian Communist Party, held in March, 1920, was characterized by a number of measures which meant a complete turn to the right. Foremost among them was a militarization of labour and the establishment of one-man management of industry, as against the collegiate shop system. Obligatory labour had long been a law upon the statutes of the Socialist Republic, but it was carried out, as Trotsky said, "only in a small private way." Now the law was to be made effective in earnest. Russia was to have a militarized industrial army to fight economic disorganization, even as the Red Army had conquered on the various fronts. Such an army could be whipped into line only by rigid discipline, it was claimed. The factory collegiate system had to make place for military industrial management.

The measure was bitterly fought at the Congress by the Communist minority, but party discipline prevailed. However, the excitement did not abate: discussion of the subject continued long after the congress adjourned. Many of the younger Communists agreed that the measure indicated a step to the right, but they defended the decision of their party. "The collegiate system has proven a failure," they said. "The workers will not work voluntarily, and our industry must be revived if we are to survive another year."

Jack Reed also held this view. He had just returned after a futile attempt to reach America through Latvia, and for days we argued about the new policy. Jack insisted it was unavoidable so long Russia was being attacked and blockaded. "We have been compelled to mobilize an army to fight our external enemies, why not an army to fight our worst internal enemy, hunger? We can do it only by putting our industry on its feet." I pointed out the danger of the military method and questioned whether the workers could be expected to become efficient or to work intensively under compulsion. Still, Jack thought mobilization of labour inevitable. "It must be tried, anyhow," he said.

Petrograd at the time was filled with rumours of strikes. The story made the rounds that Zinoviev and his staff, while visiting the factories to explain the new policies, were driven by workers from the premises. To learn about the situation at first had I decided to visit the factories. Already during my first months in Russia I had asked Zorin for permission to see them. Lisa Zorin had requested me to address some labour meetings, but I declined because I felt that it would be presumptuous on my part to undertake to teach those who had made the revolution. Besides, I was not quite at home with the Russian language then. But when I asked Zorin to let me visit some factories, he was evasive. After I had become acquainted with Ravitch I approached her on the subject, and she willingly consented.
The first works to be visited were the Putilov, the largest and most important engine and car manufacturing establishment. Forty thousand workers had been employed there before the war. Now I was informed that only 7,000 were at work. I had heard much of the Putilovsti: they had played a heroic part in the revolutionary days and in the defense of Petrograd against Yudenich.

At the Putilov office we were cordially received, shown about the various departments, and then turned over to a guide. There were four of us in the party, of whom only two could speak Russian. I lagged behind to question a group working at a bench. At first I was met with the usual suspicion, which I overcame by telling the men that I was bringing the greetings of their brothers in America. "And the revolution there?" I was immediately asked. It seemed to have become a national obsession, this idea of a near revolution in Europe and America. Everybody in Russia clung to that hope. It was hard to rob those misinformed people of their naïve faith. "The American revolution is not yet," I told them, "but the Russian Revolution has found an echo among the proletariat in America." I inquired about their work, their lives, and their attitude toward the new decrees. "As if we had not been driven enough before," complained one of the men. "Now we are to work under the military nagaika [whip]. Of course, we will have to be in the shop or they will punish us as industrial deserters. But how can they get more work out of us? We are suffering hunger and cold. We have no strength to give more." I suggested that the Government was probably compelled to introduce such methods, and that if Russian industry were not revived the condition of the workers would grow even worse. Besides, the Putilov workers were receiving the preferred payok. "We understand the great misfortune that has befallen Russia," one of the workers replied, "but we cannot squeeze more out of ourselves. Even the two pounds of bread we are getting are not enough. Look at the bread," he said, holding up a black crust; "can we live on that? And our children? If not for our people in the country or some trading in the market we would die altogether. Now comes the new measure which is tearing us away from our people, sending us to the other end of Russia while our brothers from there are going to be dragged here, away from the soil. It's a crazy measure and it won't work."

"But what can the Government do in the face of the food shortage?" I asked. "Food shortage!" the man exclaimed; "look at the markets. Did you see any shortage of food there? Speculation and the new bourgeoisie, that's what's the matter. The one-man management is our new slave driver. First the bourgeoisie sabotaged us, and now they are again in control. But just let them try to boss us! They'll find out. Just let them try!"

The men were bitter and resentful. Presently the guide returned to see what had become of me. He took great pains to explain that industrial conditions in the mill had improved considerably since the militarization of labour went into effect. The men were more content and many more cars had been renovated and engines repaired than within an equal period under the previous management. There were 7,000 productively employed in the works, he assured me. I learned, however, that the real figure was less than 5,000 and of these only about 2,000 were actual workers. The others were Government officials and clerks.

After the Putilov works we visited the Treugolnik, the great rubber factory of Russia. The place was clean and the machinery in good order—a well-equipped modern plant. When we reached the main workroom we were met by the superintendent, who had been in charge for twenty-five years. He would show us around himself, he said. He seemed to take great pride in the factory, as if it were his own. It rather surprised me that they had managed to keep everything in such fine shape. The guide explained that it was because nearly the whole of the old staff had been left in charge. They felt that whatever might happen they must not let the place go to ruin. It was certainly very commendable, I thought, but soon I had occasion to change my mind. At one of the tables, cutting rubber, was an old worker with kindly eyes looking out of a sad, spiritual face. He reminded me of the pilgrim Lucca in Gorki's "Night Lodgings."
Our guide kept a sharp vigil, but I managed to slip away while the superintendent was explaining some machinery to the other members of the group.

"Well, batyushka, how is it with you?" I greeted the old worker. "Bad, matushka," he replied; "times are very hard for us old people." I told him how impressed I was to find everything in such good condition in the shop. "That is so," commented the old worker, "but it is because the superintendent and his staff are hoping from day to day that there will be a change again, and that the Treugolnik will go back to its former owners. I know them. I have worked here long before the German master of this plant put in the new machinery."

Passing through the various rooms of the factory I saw the women and girls look up in evident dread. It seemed strange in a country where the proletarians were the masters. Apparently the machines were not the only things that had been carefully watched over--the old discipline, too, had been preserved: the employees thought us Bolshevik inspectors.

The great flour mill of Petrograd, visited next, looked as if it were in a state of siege, with armed soldiers everywhere, even inside the workrooms. The explanation given was that large quantities of precious flour had been vanishing. The soldiers watched the mill men as if they were galley slaves, and the workers naturally resented such humiliating treatment. They hardly dared to speak. One young chap, a fine-looking fellow, complained to me of the conditions. "We are virtual prisoners," he said; "we cannot make a step without permission. We are kept heard at work eight hours with only ten minutes for our kipyatok [boiled water] and we are searched on leaving the mill." "Is not the theft of flour the cause of the strict surveillance?" I asked. "Not at all," replied the boy; "the Commissars of the mill and the soldiers know quite well where the flour goes to." I suggested that the workers might protest against such a state of affairs. "Protest, to whom?" the boy exclaimed; "we'd be called speculators and counter-revolutionists and we'd be arrested." "Has the Revolution given you nothing?" I asked. "Ah, the Revolution! But that is no more. Finished," he said bitterly.

The following morning we visited the Laferm tobacco factory. The place was in full operation. We were conducted through the plant and the whole process was explained to us, beginning with the sorting of the raw material and ending with the finished cigarettes packed for sale or shipment. The air in the workrooms was stifling, nauseating. "The women are used to this atmosphere," said the guide; "they don't mind." There were some pregnant women at work and girls no older than fourteen. They looked haggard, their chests sunken, black rings under their eyes. Some of them coughed and the hectic flush of consumption showed on their faces. "Is there a recreation room, a place where they can eat or drink their tea and inhale a bit of fresh air?" There was no such thing, I was informed. The women remained at work eight consecutive hours; they had their tea and black bread at their benches. The system was that of piece work, the employees receiving twenty-five cigarettes daily above their pay with permission to sell or exchange them.

I spoke to some of the women. They did not complain except about being compelled to live far away from the factory. In most cases it required more than two hours to go to and from work. They had asked to be quartered near the Laferm and they received a promise to that effect, but nothing more was heard of it.

Life certainly has a way of playing peculiar pranks. In America I should have scorned the idea of social welfare work: I should have considered it a cheap palliative. But in Socialist Russia the sight of pregnant women working in suffocating tobacco air and saturating themselves and their unborn with the poison impressed me as a fundamental evil. I spoke to Lisa Zorin to see whether something could not be done to ameliorate the evil. Lisa claimed that "piece work" was the only way to induce the girls to work. As to rest rooms, the women themselves had already made a fight for them, but so far nothing could be done
because no space could be spared in the factory. "But if even such small improvements had not resulted from the Revolution," I argued. "What purpose has it served?" "The workers have achieved control," Lisa replied; "they are now in power, and they have more important things to attend to than rest rooms--the have the Revolution to defend." Lisa Zorin had remained much the proletarian, but she reasoned like a nun dedicated to the service of the Church.

The thought oppressed me that what she called the "defense of the Revolution" was really only the defense of her party in power. At any rate, nothing came of my attempt at social welfare work.