

WILLIAM Z. FOSTER



IN SOVIET RUSSIA



(Editor's Note: This is the twelfth of the series of articles on Soviet Russia which Mr. Foster was commissioned to write for The Federated Press. He describes a pageant of the proletariat which shows considerable progress from the days of czarism.)

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Moscow, June 20.—Today I had the real pleasure of attending a most interesting outdoor fete. It was arranged by the Commissariat of Public Education to celebrate the opening of the Third Congress of the Communist International. The participants were half grown boys and girls, members of the various civil and semi-military organizations which go to form the great movement for the physical training of Russia's youth in preparation for its later military education.

Our party had been notified to assemble at 12 o'clock, noon, in the Continental hotel, where a large number of congress delegates are stopping. I got there at 11.30 and found all the people already gathered being hustled into a long string of street cars for immediate departure. This was indeed a marvel; in Russia things usually start an hour or two late, not ahead of time.

After a ride of about six miles we arrived at the scene of activities, Sparrow's hill. Where we alighted the view was magnificent. The valley, far below, was carpeted with the most beautiful farms and forests imaginable, through which the Moscow river lazily threaded its way. In the distance, in far flung panorama, stretched the great city of Moscow, its hundreds of gaily painted churches and golden cupolas glittering in the brilliant sunlight. I was told that Napoleon, during his ill-fated Russian campaign, camped at this entrancing spot.

Descending from the hilltop we came to a sort of bench or plateau, which formed an ideal natural amphitheater and which was still high enough to preserve the splendid view. There we found grandstands erected for us. Soon the performers began to appear: thousands of boys and girls, marching up great natural runways (one on either side) from a lower bench, which being invisible from where the spectators sat made excellent "wings" for the enormous outdoor stage. Many types of organization were represented: Red army, officers' schools, colleges, grammar and high schools, physical culture academies, etc. Practically all the boys were dressed only in short running trunks while the girls wore natty costumes of various kinds. As usual the red flag was everywhere.

The celebration began by all the participants (we counted them up to be about 10,000) drawing up in formation for inspection. This finished, they organized a parade and marched past the reviewing stand. A special feature of this parade was a detachment of army soldier girls. Uniformed and carrying bayoneted rifles like veterans, they marched in the same units as the men. With their cloth hats, khaki jackets and short skirts they cut an attractive figure. Americans, having in mind their own weak and pampered women, are inclined to smile when they hear talk of women soldiers. But those who have followed events in this country and who are acquainted with the strong Russian women, look upon the matter differently. The magnificent physique and vigor of the women in this country is a standing marvel to the American delegates.

After the parade came what was called massed military exercises. These were much the same as take place in Germany, Sweden and other countries, where some effort is made to build up the physique of the people. Thousands of youngsters drew up in detachments along the theater green-sward. Then, at flag signals from the director, they deployed step by step until each individual occupied about an eight-foot square. In this formation they then went through an elaborate set of exercises, the beauty of which needs no telling to those who have ever witnessed such a performance.

Following these exercises there were many sorts of bayonet and sword drills, ring exercises, cavalry evolutions, etc., all well done. But the

"piece de resistance", it seemed to me, was the "rhythmic exercises." These are a kind of combination of calisthenics and dancing. They are performed to band music. Originally developed in Switzerland, they were popular in Russian aristocratic circles before the revolution. The Bolsheviki have brought them to the masses. A team would start out through a long list of calisthenic movements, working them in series of three or four. That is, they would do a series of, say four movements, rapidly, pause slightly and then go on with the next, repeating this to the end. The effect is very curious and pleasing. I marveled to see the teams go through elaborate ten-minute exercises to the accompaniment of march music and then finish exactly with the last beat of the drum.

There were several varieties of these rhythmic exercises. A beautiful thing it was to see 500 boys, their naked bodies glistening in the sun, lined up in several detachments, each going through a different set of calisthenics, simultaneously to the same music, and all finishing exactly as the band came to its concluding strain. A striking piece of this type was called "hammer and shovel exercises." It was performed by 200 students from a physical culture school. There were three sections, the boys in the center being equipped with imitation sledges, and those on the two ends with spades. The dance-like movements portrayed the use of these tools. The effect was delightful. I never dreamed that there was so much poetry of motion in the proletarian shovel and hammer. But the Russian revolution has been able to find it.

A rhythmic exercise that made a hit was called "The Fall of the Tyrant." It was done to band music by 13 picked physical culturists. They were dressed as Romans. One typified the tyrant exploiter and 12 the oppressed workers. The latter, to the beat of the music, went through the motions portraying hard labor, pulling, lifting, hammering, throwing, etc. always driven on heartlessly by the tyrant. Now and again one would revolt; then two or three; but the tyrant would crush them and drive them back to their work again. Finally, one dies at his work from exhaustion and the others, enraged, find the solidarity that enables them to rise together and to overthrow the tyrant. That ended the piece. In its art as well as in its politics and economics Communism knows how to produce the educational effects that will eventually emancipate Russia.

In view of the shortage of food I was particularly interested in noting the physical condition of the boys. This was easy to do as they were practically naked. To me they looked like an especially husky bunch of kids. I am sure that they would more than average up with an equal number of American boys similarly assembled. It was touching to see the way the grownups, the revolutionists, followed their evolutions. During the day I heard it said fifty times that they are the hope of Russia. The Communists consider the present generation practically ruined as a result of its capitalist training. They say "Give us the children for a few years longer and then capitalism will forever be impossible in Russia, no matter what may become of the Communist government."

The festival finished by all hands singing "The Marseillaise" and "The International." Then we went to the river bank, where we had tea in a swell, flag-decked boat clubhouse, whose aristocratic former owners have departed for parts unknown. As we drank our tea and ate our black bread we speculated as to where these parasites were and what they would have thought could they have known the use we were putting "their" property to.