

In John Scott's memoir, *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel*, an extremely vivid picture of industrial life in the adolescent Soviet Union. Scott displays his experiences and memories in painstaking detail from his collected writings, journals, and interviews while living in the Soviet "City of Steel," Magnitogorsk, just east of the Ural Mountains from 1932 to 1938. While living in the Stalin-era Soviet Union, Scott observed many of the Bolshevik leader's policies firsthand and records them strictly from a first-person perspective. As a result, Scott accurately describes everyday Soviet life, specifically East of the Urals in the heavily industrialized center of Magnitogorsk, but he does not connect to much else beyond this bubble. The author's bias is important to this account but does not compromise the integrity of the source, accuracy of events is displayed conceptually and emotionally, and, finally, the contextual influence of Scott's writing casts the final light on the goal of this memoir by answering: "What makes Russia Click?"

In order to analyze the reliability of the source, without diving into any of the contextual influences yet, the background of the author must be examined, revealing bias. John Scott most certainly was biased, like most, but this author as the book displays is of the utmost bias. Because of the economic collapse of the Great Depression in the United States in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Scott became disheartened, similar to millions at the time. John Scott, however, took this disheartenment several steps beyond most. After learning a valuable trade in welding, Scott disembarked for the Soviet Union with the help of his Bolshevik-sympathetic father to take advantage of the seemingly endless industrial opportunity east of the Ural Mountains. With a pit stop in Berlin to attend Communist demonstrations, by the time Scott reached Moscow he had completely abandoned and turned extremely anti-American. He became, in all but name, a Soviet

citizen, obsessed with Bolshevism.<sup>1</sup> After arriving in Magnitogorsk, Scott was so dedicated to Communist growth, he took jobs in conditions alongside his fellow workers in extremely terrible conditions, frequently to the point of death.<sup>2</sup> Obviously, John Scott did not meet the oft fate of his fellow comrades, but these occupational conditions were far worse than jobs back the United States, when they became available of course. Another aspect to consider when determining the reliability of a primary source is determining its degree of balance. Whether or not the author is inclusive of multiple perspectives. Whether or not the author is overly critical or not critical enough of the events they are describing. Whether or not the author decides to include certain events and omit others. Scott is obviously biased as already established, but he fulfills the second condition listed above in both ways. Scott does not overly praise the Bolsheviks in particular but delivers most of the credit to the workers who produced the enormous industrial output of the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>3</sup> Scott, on the other hand, is not critical at all of any Stalinist policies. Through the first stages book, John Scott is focused on the day-to-day life of the Magnitogorsk steel industry that a case can be made the author's focus was not directly on these Stalinist policies; therefore, Scott could afford to avoid addressing them. As time progressed in Magnitogorsk, however, the purges of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union increased from 1936 to 1938 to the point that Scott had to acknowledge them. Nevertheless, Scott stays true to the style of his book by reporting his observations of and summarizing the rumor mill surrounding the disappearances, dismissals, and arrests of the purges. John Scott never connects the purges beyond the local levels of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), never mind all the way to Stalin himself. The author even implies that his position that General Secretary

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<sup>1</sup> Scott, John, p. 3-4

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 14

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Kotkin in Scott, John, p. xviii

Stalin was not directly involved and unaware of the full scope of the purge.<sup>4</sup> This position has been disproven over the years following Scott's initial compilation in 1942.<sup>5</sup> Scott goes so far as to justify these events as mere products of Bolshevik ideology and culture of harsh punishment and strict control and something that western democracies could not possibly understand.<sup>6</sup> Scott eventually became disillusioned with Stalinist Bolshevism because of these purges, eventually defecting back to the United States, but not until after completing and possibly as a result of this memoir. In conclusion, John Scott may have been biased but he was adequately biased enough to bring this memoir into the public view. While Scott was not deliberately misleading his audience, his observations were perhaps shallow and short-sighted.<sup>7</sup>

Another crucial method of analyzing a primary source is to examine the events of that the author describes and then determine their accuracy. By comparing them to external sources, these events can either lend credibility to the author's account or strip it of historical worth. Generally speaking, John Scott's memoir, for what it includes, measures up to the accuracy standards set by other external sources. The author, as previously stated, lived and worked in the USSR alongside normal Soviet citizens with little superiority outside of his compensation. Scott describes in great detail much of ordinary Soviet life throughout the book and the normal events in their lives that would pique the interest of western democracies. The famine of 1932 and 1933 is a good example of this and the beginning of Scott's shallow observations. Scott describes the shortages faced the industrial complex of Magnitogorsk well and the struggles the individual people faced there.<sup>8</sup> Scott either omits or is unaware of at the time of writing the events occurring

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<sup>4</sup> Scott, John, p. 207

<sup>5</sup> Khlevniuk, Oleg V, p. xix

<sup>6</sup> Scott, John, p. 189

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Kotkin in Scott, John, p. xxiv

<sup>8</sup> Scott, John, p. 33

the Ukraine and Northern Caucasus regions causing the famine and shortages. Scott does discuss his observations on the restrictions of freedom in the Soviet Union during the formative Stalin years and are perhaps the only events that he connects all the way back to the Soviet leader mainly but only because of the propaganda and media that declared it so. Scott describes the local Soviet power structure and organization. In industrial towns such as Magnitogorsk, trade unions ran much of the affairs of the town, while the formal government officials were more figureheads than active bureaucrats. Soviet law at the time provided for “elections,” but such were in name only. In reality, these “elections” of trade unions officials and bureaucrats were complete shams. Officials were chosen by the central government in Moscow to serve in these positions, usually trained in some Communist Party school. Meetings were held and all citizens were allowed to attend to voice their opinion, but attendance was always scarce because of long work hours with little break.<sup>9</sup> Briefly, Scott describes the educational institutions of the city and, even more briefly, applies the problems found in it to the broader union. The author recounts that instructors frequently disappeared or were replaced, and instructional materials frequently were revised or thrown out.<sup>10</sup> Because of these observations and no knowledge of external events, Scott draws the conclusion that incompetence was the reason for these removals, inconsistencies, hypocrisies, and misinformation.<sup>11</sup> This logic continued over into his observations and initial interpretations of the purges between 1936 and 1938. The evidence to this initially supported this, albeit limited to Magnitogorsk. Initial arrests in and around Magnitogorsk were obvious ones of blatantly greedy foreigners trying to take advantage the new Soviet industrial complex and egregiously bad administrators with past connections to Bolshevik enemies during the Civil

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<sup>9</sup> Scott, John, p. 35-6

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 45

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 46

War.<sup>12</sup> Eventually, this evolved into simple petty crime with very loose connections to potential industrial sabotage and undermining Communism. Both of these became known as the crime of “wrecking.”<sup>13</sup> As the purges progressed with his observations, John Scott never makes a direct connection back to Stalin and implies that he is free from involvement.<sup>14</sup> Scott only goes up to the local NKVD forces reacting, not proacting, to incompetence, petty crime and perceived espionage and only then using them as propaganda.<sup>15</sup> Scott does, perhaps after reflection, later in the conclusion of the chapter asserts that Stalin certainly reaped the benefits of the purges.<sup>16</sup> The exact accuracy of events matters little because the overall goal of the memoir is to depict the overall themes and experiences of daily Soviet life on the most basic of scale, but that does not give enough cause to ignore certain contextual influences that perhaps caused the omissions of full details and connections, and watering down of atrocities.

In a review of John Scott’s memoir, Ida Treat praises that “he conceals nothing; he relates.”<sup>17</sup> While this in fact is true, Scott does not conceal or cover up anything on a basic, superficial level. Towards the end, the author changed his pace, structure, and direction of the memoir to answer the question: “What makes Russia click?” While Scott may be looking to fancifully cap his work with a thesis, this is reflected at the beginning, where a thesis would typically be found. It can be, in fact, a propaganda piece influenced by the current events happening around Moscow in 1942. During this time, Nazi Germany made its farthest push into Soviet territory in history, right into the vicinity of the capital. This ending is perhaps intended to

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 179-82

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 184-5

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 197

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 188

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 207

<sup>17</sup> Treat, Ida, p. 602

be used as morale boost to the Soviet citizens in a wartime crisis to keep them working.<sup>18</sup> The Soviet Union had yet to have an economic collapse<sup>19</sup>, so Scott perhaps felt the need to fortify the identity of the Soviet working class.<sup>20</sup> In conclusion, the importance of the Russian Click question becomes clear: coinciding with the purge and the start of war in Western Euro seemed to justify stricter policies<sup>21</sup>, exponential increase of production and war prep, and needing to prep for enemies where there weren't yet any.<sup>22</sup> The answer is the mass of industrial output of the Urals<sup>23</sup>, the people's undying to point of death devotion in Stalin<sup>24</sup>, and propaganda to make them feel good in return.<sup>25</sup>

*Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel*, a memoir by John Scott, depicts the brutal life of the Soviet worker leading up to the Second World War. It is not, however, without its shortcomings. These shortcomings, however, provide necessary focus on the arduous, ordinary, and the day-to-day life of the working-class east of the Urals. This book is a reliable source for the specific time, place, and environment in which it is set,<sup>26</sup> but not well outside his own bubble. While some may deem this book as a propaganda piece on the Soviet worker, its influences are clear and obvious.

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen Kotkin in Scott, John, p. xxiii

<sup>19</sup> Evtuhov, Catherine and Richard Stites, p. 444

<sup>20</sup> Scott, John. p. 23, 26, 49

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 254

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 255

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 263

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 264

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 265

<sup>26</sup> Far Eastern Survey, p. 186

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