

An American Inspection Tour of the Soviet First Five-Year Plan, 1931

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Abstract:

This article presents an archival 11-page manuscript written by John M. Carmody in 1958, housed in the Carmody Papers at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library in Hyde Park, New York and offers insight into American perspectives on the Soviet Union's First Five-Year Plan. In the manuscript, Carmody, a prominent New Deal figure, reflects on his experiences with U.S. engineers like John K. Calder and Hugh Cooper, who contributed to industrial projects such as the Stalingrad Tractor Plant and the Dneprostroy Dam. The manuscript details Soviet-American collaboration, highlighting cultural exchanges, technical expertise, and the ideological backdrop of industrialization. It underscores the complex interplay of engineering achievements, propaganda, and individual contributions during a pivotal era in Soviet history.

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John M. Carmody
Edited by Norman Saul

Introduction

The following 11-page typed manuscript was found in box 39 of the Carmody Papers in the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library in Hyde Park, New York. John Michael Carmody (1881-1963) was a major figure in President Roosevelt's "New Deal" administration (which explains the location of his papers), serving as a member of the National Labor Relation Board (1935), chief engineer of the Civil Works Administration (1933), administrator of the Rural Electrification Administration (1937), and head of the Federal Works Agency (1939), as well as a number of important war time posts, such as a member of the United States Maritime Commission (1941-46).

After attending Elmira College and the Lewis Institute in Chicago, Carmody was involved for a number of years in the manufacturing of women's coats, and then with factory inspections for the coal and steel industries in the United States. Just before his Russia trip he was editor of *Factory and Industrial Management* magazine. The manuscript has a penciled note, "prepared by John M. Carmody, 6/6/58." Additional information may be found in the Carmody oral history at Columbia University, which I was unable to consult, because of lockdowns due to the virus pandemic.

RUSSIAN TRIP –1931 **EXPERIENCES WITH JOHN K. CALDER** **By John M. Carmody**

Of all the American engineers who went to Russia during the 'First Five Year Plan - 1928-1932 - to make American techniques available in the early days of building Russia's industrial plant, only two of them, Hugh Cooper¹ and John K.

¹ Hugh Lincoln Cooper (1865-1937) was a major figure in American assistance to Russia during the First Five-Year Plan. Obtaining a reputation in the United States for construction of the Keokuk dam across the Mississippi River and the Muscle Shoals Dam in Alabama. He was hired by a Soviet delegation to the U. S to design and construct a dam on the Dnepr River in Ukraine as part of the plan to provide power for a steel complex and affiliated industries.

Calder really caught the imagination of the Russian people or received frequent laudatory acclaim of the Moscow correspondents of American newspapers or itinerant writers. Others, doing equally important work in oil, steel, coal, tractors, power, food, etc. - Austin,² McKee,³ Polakor? Szpasi, Stuart, James, Freyn - got scant notice in the American press, and seemed to be known in Russia only to local directors of the plants they served.

It was different with Cooper and Calder. It was Hugh Cooper who participated with Russian engineers in the design of the huge Dneiperstroï dam and in the supervision of its construction largely through a considerable staff housed in an attractive village it had built for itself at the site. The huge dam, the first of a series built on many rivers, furnishes power for a huge complex of Metallurgical industries that were under construction when I was there in 1931.

Calder, unlike Cooper and others, who supervised their American staffs in Russia largely from their home offices in New York or Pittsburgh or Cleveland or Chicago, remained in Russia and worked alone, except for a Russian interpreter and one or two American assistants. For a couple of years before I went to Russia before in 1931, I had seen his name in newspapers, as I had seen Cooper's, especially in the *New York Times*. Walter Duranty,⁴ *New York Times* correspondent in Moscow, frequently mentioned Calder in connection with some special construction achievement. This was especially true of the Stalingrad Tractor plant, the first of the big new Five-Year Plan plants to be finished ahead of schedule and ready to house production machinery. I was to learn later that Calder had been a steel erector in the employ of a Detroit contractor whose firm built the Dearborn plant of the Ford Co. This was at the time one of the largest industrial plants in the world.

When the first Five-Year Plan was under consideration the USSR sent several missions (usually consisting of from five to ten engineers and economists) to the United States to study plants in various industries. The mission that devoted

² Much more is now known about the activities in Russia of the Austin Company from research in the company records, preserved in the Western Historical Society Archives in Cleveland, Ohio. Founded by Samuel Austin, an English immigrant, in 1878, the Austin Company became noted for its planning "method" of designing a construction project in engineering offices down to the last bolt before proceeding to the site. Approached first by Henry Ford, the Soviet delegation to the United States for building a factory, he recommended Austin. For more, see my book: *Friends or Foes?: The United States & Russia, 1921-1941* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2006), 229-38. The Austin Company project also included the construction of a model city for workers at the site outside Nizhny Novgorod, supervised by Allan Austin, a son of the company president.

³ Also, in Cleveland, the Alexander McKee Company was contracted to build the large steel complex at Magnitogorsk in the Urals. Ibid. 223-229. See also, John Scott, *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

⁴ Walter Duranty (1884-1957). British-born journalist, as Moscow Bureau Chief for the *New York Times* for fourteen years, Duranty was known for his coverage of 'the great leap forward of the First Five-Year Plan' though he was later accused of minimizing the costs, such as the famine in Ukraine and his glossing over the extent of the purges. Many of his articles were also published in book form.

its time to study of manufacturing automobiles, trucks, tractors, etc., was deeply impressed by what they saw at Dearborn - buildings, equipment, methods. The buildings had been designed by Albert Kahn and Company,⁵ well known industrial architects who were able to incorporate in it, with the aid of Ford's production managers, the best techniques that had been evolved during some twenty years of dynamic experiences at the very center of auto Detroit manufacturing. This intrigued the Russian mission.

Result? Albert Kahn Company was engaged to design the new plant at Stalingrad fashioned after Dearborn. American machinery was purchased to install in the plant when the buildings were ready. Actual construction of the buildings in Russia was done under the supervision of dynamic Commissar Orzenikidsie [Ordzhonikidze].⁶ The Russians had asked Kahn to recommend a man to erect the steel frame, and at which the Russians had not yet learned. Kahn recommended John K. Calder, who had supervised the erection of the steel frames for various buildings, that make up the plant complex at Dearborn. Calder accepted, taking with him a couple of young, recently graduated engineers who were then working with him on another contract, the Hudson store building in Detroit, Jim McElroy and Spencer. Under Ordzhonikidze's drive, plus the party's Russia-wide push to get a big start with the first big plant under the Five-Year Plan, materials were rushed to Stalingrad, fabricated steel in huge quantities was supplied, and the buildings were complete and ready for equipment installation three months ahead of schedule.

All Russia was thrilled. Newspapers, all Party controlled, carried feature stories; loud speakers everywhere acclaimed the feat. Calder shared in the acclaim. It was here he won recognition for accomplishment. The Russian newspapers carried his name; foreign correspondents like Walter Duranty and H. R. Knickerbocker⁷ brought his name and achievements brought his name and achievements to the attention of the American people. When I

⁵ Albert Kahn (1865-1942), a German immigrant, was a well-known as an industrial designer for the construction of the Ford River Rouge plant in Dearborn, Michigan, and many other large factories. He also designed a number of public buildings and private residences, such as the mansion of Edsel and Eleanor Ford, near Detroit, now a museum open to the public. Soviet visitors were impressed with his work.

⁶ Grigory (Sergo) Ordzhonikidze (1886-1937), as Chairman of the Supreme Council of National Economy (VSENKHA) in 1930, he was a major figure in the development of the First Five-Year Plan. He can be considered an early victim of the Great Purge. He had a shouting match argument with Stalin in February of 1937, both in person and on the phone, after which he committed suicide. Martin McCauley, *Who's Who in Russia Since 1900* (London: Routledge, 1997), 153. Ordzhonikidze was an unusual character, as the following description indicates: "an old friend of Lenin, and an even older friend of Stalin [they first met in Tiflis in 1906], . . . he was torn between the two 'faiths'. He chose his countryman, Stalin. . . . Sergo was impetuous, brutal, disorganized and effervescent, quick with his laugh as with his temper." Georges Haupt and Jean-Jacques Marie, *Makers of the Russian Revolution* (Ithaca; Cornell University Press, 1974), 178.

⁷ Hubert Renfro Knickerbocker (1898-1949) Duranty's younger rival as a reporter of the same scene in Russia in the 1930's and continuing to cover the war time and post war Europe for the *New York Evening Post* until he died in a plane crash in India near Bombay.

called on Valery Mezhlauk,⁸ the head of Gosplan (the whole Five-Year complex) before I made the more extensive part of my trip, he volunteered the statement that “Calder is the best engineer we have had from America.” He advised me to see him when I stopped at Chelyabinsk on my way to Magnitogorsk. I did. I flew to Sverdlovsk the next day and went by auto to Chelyabinsk over “wagon-trail” roads not unlike early trails across our own western prairies in pioneer days. It was nearly midnight when we arrived, my interpreter Helen, myself, our driver and the young secretary of the local Komsomol, whom we had picked up in Sverdlovsk. I didn’t seem him again. My interpreter took me to the apartment of some Americans whom she knew. They “did not know we were coming but I’m sure we will be welcome.”

Late as it was, when Helen knocked on the door, a young man in a dressing gown opened it, exclaiming, “why Helen!” as she showed equal delight. They embraced like long lost brother and sister. The young man was James McElroy. The apartment was John Calder’s. He had gone to a nearby lake resort for the night. Another occupant, Spencer, who, like McElroy, was an assistant to Calder, was convalescing at the Black Sea resort, Sochi. McElroy was alone. He had not seen an American, except for his two associates, in many months. Yes, we were welcome. Helen, the interpreter who had brought previous American visitors, found a place to sleep and Jim McElroy, a graduate of Michigan State College, talked to me long into the night. He had worked Calder on construction in Detroit, had gone to Stalingrad⁹ with him and for a whole year had been with him in Chelyabinsk. He spoke Russian so well he did not require an interpreter, rare among Americans I met in Russia. Knickerbocker had visited this project in 1930 and written about it in his book, “The Red Trade Menace.” He had mentioned McElroy as he wrote more extensively about Calder and his achievements. Of Calder he had said (page 82). “Tall, mustached tight-lipped, handsome, Calder is the sort of figure of an American that springs to mind when one thinks of picturesque feats of engineering in far corners of the earth. One of the first American engineers to come to the Soviet Union to work under the Five-Year Plan, he brought with him rich experience in industrial construction in America. His first job was the Stalingrad Tractor plant. He completed it in six and a half months, far ahead of schedule. This accomplishment, his candor and fearlessness were factors that won him the distinction, etc.”

I had read this and many other references to Calder’s achievements in Russia. I had heard Meshlauk praise him as the “best American engineer who had come

⁸ Valery Mezhlauk (1893-1938) was born in Kharkiv, Ukraine, and a graduate of the university there in 1917. He was known for his skill in economic organization and planning as first deputy chairman of GOSPLAN in 1931-34. He served as a member of an economic delegation to the United States in 1929 that met with Henry Ford. (The Library of Congress has a photograph of the meeting.) He was executed in 1938, a victim of the great purge. See Archie Brown, ed. *The Soviet Union: A Biographical Dictionary*, (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 249.

⁹ The Stalingrad tractor plant was leased to International Harvester, a leading American company, heralding its return to Russia, where it had been a major presence before the revolution.

to Russia from America.” Helen, my interpreter, a clever, sharp girl who had taken interested visitors to many projects, sang Calder’s praises. Now I was in his apartment in Russia talking to one of his assistants.

In all of this, reading, talking, listening, it never once dawned on me that I never had seen Calder or heard of him in any other connection.

Again, Knickerbocker had written, “The first spadeful of earth was turned on the Chelyabinsk plant July 20, 1930, at a ceremony where Calder was called upon to speak, from a platform red with slogans of revolution, between members of the young Communists having drawn sabers symbolic of the war for industrialization.”¹⁰

As McElroy and I walked out to the site early next morning a man emerged from a construction shanty a couple of hundred yards away and walked toward me. As we shook hands, he said quietly, “How is Him, how is Art? The “Jim” is my brother James, the “Art” was Arthur Grimes. The man was Jack Calder. So, this was the man I had been reading about, the man who had won distinction in Russia for accomplishment in construction and quite rightly so!! Strange that I had not once connected his name with the Jack Calder I had known many years earlier in Chicago and Detroit.

Jack Calder had a secret. He knew that “Jim” and “Art” knew it. He knew I knew it. I do not know what went through his mind. My own mind flashed back to an experience with Jack Calder twenty years earlier that reflected no credit on him, but I had no intention of referring to it. He had been a member of a secret service or spy or espionage system of the United States Steel Corporation while he was a steel inspector for Robert W. Hunt and Company, an independent engineering inspection firm. I don’t recall how precisely how Arthur Grimes, a Hunt Company inspector in Detroit in 1910-11, where American Bridge Company, a U. S. Steel Corporation subsidiary had a fabricating plant, came by his knowledge. It may only be observation and deduction, My brother’s case was different. He too was a Hunt and Company inspector stationed at Ambridge, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in charge of several Hunt stationed there. Ambridge was then Ambridge Bridge Company’s largest plant, tonnage-wise and employee-wise.

Calder, whom my brother had never met and whose status he was unaware of, came to Ambridge and introduced himself as a friend of mine in Chicago, where I was at the time superintendent of Joseph T. Ryerson and Son fabricating shops. Calder proposed to my brother that he make some money “on the side” by entering the U. S. Steel Corporation espionage or spy system while at the same time remaining on the Hunt and Company payroll. My brother immediately wrote to me in Chicago and asked, “What kind of friends are you making in Chicago?” Nothing more - name and facts later.

Meantime, recalling occasional rumors that so and so, sometimes an inspector, was a member of this rumored spy system, my brother, James decided to get the facts. He got in touch with Calder. Calder introduced him to Cherry, Chief of U.

¹⁰ H.R. Knickerbocker, *Red Trade Menace: Progress of the Soviet Trade Five-Year Plan* (New York: Dodd, Mead Publishers, 1931), 128.

S. Steel espionage at their headquarters in Pittsburgh - Carnegie or Frick building - who explained what his duties would be, and his salary, and gave him report forms and the number he would be known by.

When my brother had got all this information and appeared to be ready to sign he said "Mr. Cherry, I've heard about this system. I've heard from time to time that some inspectors were participating in it. I thought they were rumors. Now I know the system exists, how it works and that inspectors actually are enticed into it." He left the office, went back to Ambridge and wrote me in detail. Later he told me the story orally. He had been at Ambridge three years. Two of his sons were born there. He was well established in the community, much respected and popular in the plant. These were good qualities for a spy to have, I suppose, especially one who, by the terms of the contracts covering the various bridges and building materials he inspected, provided that he enter and remain in the plant at any and all hours of the night.

Net result? Robert W. Hunt and Company was notified by U. S. Steel Corporation that James was persona non grata on Steel Company property. He was transferred to Buffalo, New York where the steel mills and shops were owned by others. He was upset but got used to it.

I spent the evening with Calder and McElroy alone in their apartment (the interpreter resented being left out of these conversations). My acquaintance with Calder, apart from what my brother and Art Grimes had told me, was limited to one or two brief visits he made to our Ryerson shop in Chicago to inspect some bridge material for a client. I told him I had once been a Hunt and Company inspector and treated him as I knew any inspector liked to be treated - courteously (spreading material to save his time, etc.).

That evening in Chelyabinsk Calder was worried and looked it. No steel had arrived, no progress had been made for months. He was "sitting it out." It was not until I told him that Mezhlauk had said ("best American engineer in Russia") that he really came alive. He asked me to repeat it. I did. His face lit up, he began complaining about the November 10, the Director, Levin, whom I had seen briefly a few days earlier in Moscow and Sverdlovsk, and who, incidentally, had not mentioned Calder when he talked about the plant. Calder then said, "I'll get that so-and-so. I'm going to Moscow tomorrow and see Mezhlauk. I'll get another assignment." McElroy told me privately Calder was different man. When he, McElroy, and Spencer (another assistant away at the time) complained, Calder had told them, "sit tight, take it easy," etc. how he was fixed up. He wanted another assignment. I went on to Magnitogorsk in Western Siberia; Calder went to Moscow.

I am near the end of the story. When I got back to Moscow after my trip to Magnitogorsk, Siberia, ten days later, Calder was there in the Grand Hotel where I stayed when I was in Moscow. His faithful interpreter, Anna, had joined him. He had befriended her when her husband had been hustled off one midnight by the G. P. U. She was interpreter, nurse, provider of food, companion, advisor, and what have you. Very competent. McElroy, also, had resigned at Chelyabinsk. He decided to go home to Michigan. Ray Stack, who had been so kind and helpful to

me at Magnitogorsk a few days earlier, arrived. He was acting chief for McKee, of Cleveland, and in charge of the McKee staff. He, too, was “fed up;” He was going home to Duluth. The hotel was crowded. I finally found him a place to sleep, but he insisted on staying with me in my single room. He wouldn’t go to bed. He sat up all night, drank a fifth of Scotch and woke me up every little while to talk to me. As the strock oar on the first eight-oared shell that Wisconsin University had entered in the Hudson River regatta, he was rugged enough to blow off that kind of steam.

About the author

Norman E. Saul is Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Kansas. Author of many works on Russian-American relations, he is also co-founding editor of *Journal of Russian American Studies (JRAS)*.