Käthe Kollwitz on Her Visit to Soviet Russia (1927/1943)

Abstract

To mark the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1927, Soviet leaders convened the World Congress of the Friends of the Soviet Union in Moscow. Of the 947 foreign delegates in attendance, 173 of them came from Germany, making it the largest foreign delegation there by far. This outsized presence reflected the respect that Germans on the political left had for the Soviet Union at the time, as well as the respect that Soviet officials had for the central role that Germany had always played in the international socialist movement.

Among those 173 delegates, the Soviets had invited the renowned German artist and longtime socialist Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) and her husband Karl, a physician. Kollwitz wrote almost nothing about the trip in her diaries, but she did send a letter home to her son Hans from Moscow, and she also gave an interview to a Moscow newspaper and, much later, reflected in her memoir fragment on the importance of this trip. Although she had regularly supported the more moderate Social Democratic Party (SPD) in German elections, rather than the more revolutionary and Soviet-friendly Communist Party (KPD), Kollwitz nevertheless felt inspired by the zeal that she saw in KPD activists. The trip to Moscow clearly reinforced and magnified the sympathetic feelings that Kollwitz already had for Communism.

The letter to her son, the excerpt from her Moscow newspaper interview, and the fragment from her unfinished memoir all reveal her sense of awe at the novelty and the potential inherent in the grand social experiment that she and her husband were seeing for the first time. Although the Soviet Union evoked just as much fear in Germany during the Weimar Republic as it did admiration, it undeniably attracted Germans' attention and elicited their fascination. These descriptions and reflections from Kollwitz suggest some of the reasons why.

Source

Source 1: Letter and newspaper interview

Moscow, November 6, 1927

the first of the three days of great celebrations

Dear Children,

Today we have a little time off early, so I would like to write to you, even though it is difficult to summarize what we are experiencing here. Today we both said to each other that this is one of the most interesting things our lives have offered us. I am very happy that Father is with me and can see and hear everything, which I alone could report so poorly afterwards. Of course there are also boring hours, but they disappear. It is not so much *Russia with its people and so on* that keeps me so busy here, but the *completely new* political and social structure, the Soviet Republic. Since we slowly passed under the red Soviet star at the Russian border, I noticed the *other side*. At the border, we changed cars, got out, and were welcomed and entertained in the decorated train station building. The locals stood packed together and let us pass. (We had grown to at least 100 people of different nationalities.) We had to sit at a long table in the decorated wooden hall and were served food, while the delegates spoke, and the Russians spoke and there were many cheers.

In Minsk, there was another reception and more speeches and the Internationale. It was late at night

before we could lie down and sleep. The joyful tension increased the closer we got to Moscow. People were hugging, singing, laughing. In Moscow, a crowd of people waiting pounced on the train, so to speak, with a roar. Everyone fell into each other's arms. In front of us Holitscher hugged and kissed Kamenewa.[1] But now I'm getting into details again, and it's not worth getting into. I just wanted to tell you today what I said at the beginning of the letter: it's *uncharted territory* here. And you don't read about that in books, and you don't hear it said, as I was told a hundred times in Germany, but you see it, you hear it, you feel it. And that's what's so tremendously exciting. Of course, what you are told is all for show, so to speak; Ermanski says that the real Russia is quite different from what we see from our little peephole.[2] But he also says that you are here in a stream of life that flows at a completely different pace than in other countries.

Today is the third of the big celebrations. Yesterday there was a big parade on Red Square past Lenin's tomb-mausoleum. It is built in such a way that there is a broad platform at the top, where the Soviet government stood to inspect the parade. Only one person was sitting – the old Clara Zetkin – "Zetkina."[3]

The parade began at 9 o'clock with the military parade, which then turned into a parade of the armed workers' battalions. But then there were also demonstration marches with endless emblems, taunts, etc. We went home after 1 o'clock. When we went to Ermanski's later, the stream of demonstrators had not yet passed; it is said to have lasted until half past seven.

I will tell you about our work, which is really not insignificant (you are actually always "on duty") another time. Today just this, so that you know that we are doing well and so that you know briefly how the wind blows here. Please send this letter to Sterns[4] and then to Konrad.[5] I hereby tell Lise that I am passing on her greetings wherever this wind is blowing strongly around me.

Farewell, farewell. I hope you are all healthy.

Your parents

Source 2: Excerpt from an interview with the *Moscow Evening Paper*, November 11, 1927

[…]

"This is not the place to discuss why I am not a communist. But it is the place to say that the events of the last ten years in Russia seem to me comparable only to the great and far-reaching significance of the events of the great French Revolution. An old world, undermined by four years of war and revolutionary work, was shattered in November 1917. A new world was hammered together in the broadest strokes. In an essay from the early days of the Soviet Republic, Gorky speaks of flying "soles up." I feel that I can sense this gale-force wind in Russia. I have often envied the Communists their fervor, their fervor of faith."

[…]

Source 3: Fragment from Kollwitz' Memoirs, "The Years 1914-1933 in Upheaval" (1943)

[…]

In 1927, Soviet Russia celebrated its tenth anniversary. I was invited and Karl accompanied me. I had resolved not to let myself be caught off guard this time, but to look at everything with a cool head. Once again, I couldn't do it: Russia intoxicated me. I had the satisfaction that Karl, who went there as a firm Social Democrat, didn't remain quite firm either. There was too much there among the new institutions

that seemed excellent to him. Among the speakers who, having returned from Russia, gave a short report on Russia in the League for Human Rights, was Karl.

[…]

NOTES

[1] Arthur Holitscher was a Hungarian writer living in Berlin, who knew Kollwitz through their mutual engagement with the socialist and pacifist movements; Olga Kameneva was chair of the USSR's Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries.
[2] Kollwitz might be referring to Ossip Ermanski, a Soviet researcher in the science of work and the subfield known as psychotechnics.
[3] Clara Zetkin (1857-1933) was a longtime socialist and women's-rights advocate as well as a member of the Reichstag for the KPD, 1920-1933.
[4] Her sister Lise and brother-in-law Georg.
[5] Kollwitz' brother.

Source: Käthe Kollwitz, *Die Tagebücher*, ed. Jutta Bohnke-Kollwitz. East Berlin: Wolf Jobst Siedler Verlag, 1989, pp. 746–47, 899–900.

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