John Scott was an American writer born in Philadelphia in 1912. His father was a college professor and well-known radical (person favoring extreme social or political change). Scott was a restless young man who, in 1931 during the Great Depression in America, decided to travel to the Soviet Union to witness firsthand "the great socialist experiment." He received a welder's certificate from the General Electric plant in New York and applied for a job in the Soviet Union. Scott was hired to work as a welder in Stalin's prototype (ideal or model) industrial city, Magnitogorsk (pronounced Mag-NEE-toh-gorsk), which was built in the wide-open steppe just beyond the southern tip of the Ural mountains. The city was built to be the world's largest and most technologically advanced iron and steel plant, and immediately became the symbol of Stalin's plan to build socialism and industrialize the Soviet Union.

After living in Magnitogorsk, Scott wrote *Behind the Urals*, a firsthand account of what it was like to live in an industrial city in the Soviet Union as Stalin's economic plan unfolded in the early 1930s.

**Living Conditions**

John Scott lived like most Soviet workers in Magnitogorsk. During his five years there, he witnessed dramatic changes in the living conditions of the Soviet people. When Scott first arrived, the city was under construction. Nothing he had read or heard prepared him for the difficulties he encountered. Scott described the city as a dirty, chaotic construction camp. "In early April it was still bitter cold, we had hardly a single thaw, everything was still frozen solid. By May the ground had thawed and the city was swimming in mud."

Scott's first home in Magnitogorsk was a long, one-story wooden barrack that he shared with 80 other young workers. Each worker had an iron bed frame and a small brick stove. Although he had little privacy, Scott was proud that the barrack was owned by the construction workers who lived in it, and no one paid rent. In the evening, workers gathered in a communal (shared) library in the barrack, known as the red corner, and played guitars and *balalaikas* (Russian musical instrument), sang revolutionary songs, and complained about the lack of food. Many workers also took advantage of free classes offered in the...
evening, studying reading, Russian, mathematics, and politics and developing new technical skills.

As an American who was used to a higher standard of living and modern conveniences, Scott found life in the Soviet Union very difficult, but he rarely complained. He understood that the standard of living of many of his co-workers had improved by coming to Magnitogorsk. Many had never seen an electric light or a book before. Others were reading newspapers; learning about the ideas of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin; and building a steel mill larger than any in Europe.

Scott observed that conditions for the ordinary worker had greatly improved in Magnitogorsk by 1937. Everyone had enough food to eat, though consumer goods were always in short supply. Although thousands of unskilled workers continued to live in mud huts, Scott and other skilled workers lived in small but relatively modern apartments with running water, central heating, and electricity. Many workers studied full-time at the newly built technical university, and Magnitogorsk boasted street cars and movie theaters.

**Working Conditions**

Each morning at 6:00 A.M. the factory whistle woke John Scott and his co-workers. Without time to build a fire for cooking food, they dawned heavy sheepskin jackets and walked two miles to the blast furnaces, where they worked in weather that was often as cold as 35 degrees below zero. By 6:45 A.M., workers gathered in a heated shack where a foreman assembled work crews and gave assignments for the day. Often equipment was broken or missing or workers did not have the tools or supplies they needed to complete their tasks. By 9:00 A.M., Scott and his work crew were usually welding steel plates for the blast furnaces, an essential component for the production of iron and steel.

Scott found working conditions disorganized and extremely dangerous. During the winter, workers typically worked in the dark because light bulbs had burned out and there were no replacements. Workers sometimes froze to death. There was rarely enough lumber to build ladders—most lumber was burned in stoves. As a result, workers frequently fell to their death. Most of the hardships Scott encountered on the job he blamed on the inexperience of his fellow workers and the general shortage of building materials in the Soviet Union, both of which improved over time.

At noon, workers gathered in a crowded, cold dining hall for their one guaranteed meal of the day, hot soup and black bread. From 1932 to 1934 extreme food shortages led to
rationing. Workers were forced to use tickets to get their daily bread. In the winter of 1933–34, Scott observed workers living off bread crusts they had saved. Although workers got paid a relatively good wage, there was rarely anything to buy during the early years in Magnitogorsk. On some days store shelves contained milk and bread and, on rare occasions, a few consumer goods, such as shoes or cigarettes. Scott was fortunate to be able to buy other goods from a special store for foreign workers and Communist party officials.

**Industrial Production**

Scott was struck by the workers’ energy and sense of purpose. Like all workers in Magnitogorsk, Scott understood that iron and steel production was essential to Stalin’s efforts to industrialize and militarize the Soviet Union. Despite many difficulties, workers were far more productive in Magnitogorsk than Scott had anticipated.

Despite their energy and desire to carry out Stalin’s plan, production goals set in the government’s five-year plans were not met. By 1932 the first blast furnace was in operation producing iron, but it only fulfilled 44.9 percent of what the five-year plan called for 1932. Scott said, “It became obvious to many of those on the job that it was absolutely impossible to carry out the resolutions of the Moscow organizations [Communist officials].”

Scott cited a number of factors that hampered (hurt) production in Magnitogorsk. There frequently were not enough skilled workers to complete assignments, which Scott believed was caused in part because government agencies were not properly training workers and in part because workers sometimes simply did not come to work. Poor leadership and organization—assigning two groups of workers to the same job, for example—also hurt production. Scott also thought food shortages and poor working conditions reduced workers’ effectiveness.

To overcome these problems, the Communist party began in the mid 1930s to encourage competition between individuals, brigades (teams of workers), and whole departments. Scott believed this was instrumental in raising productivity. In addition, as workers gained more experience and living conditions improved, the iron and steel mill in Magnitogorsk became more productive and efficient.
The Influence of the Communist Party

John Scott came to the Soviet Union because he wanted to witness the building of what he believed would be a new society organized around the ideals of socialism (society based on equality). Instead of finding the egalitarian society Stalin had promised—one in which everyone is treated equally—Scott found that the Communist party had used its power to reward its members in Magnitogorsk with better housing, food, and working conditions than average workers. In exchange for these privileges, party members were responsible for insuring that productivity targets were met.

Scott described his friend Mitya as a typical party member who “as a party organizer, probably more than any one person, was responsible for the production successes in Mill 500. He had an efficient tongue, and knew how to talk to the workers, making them ashamed of bad work, getting them to try harder by making them understand what they were working for. He was fired up with such tangible ardor [enthusiasm] for the construction of socialism...he influenced everyone with whom he came into contact.”

Scott found the work of another part of the Communist government, the GPU, or secret police, more troubling. The GPU was responsible for the surveillance of (watching for) spies or enemies to the government. Until 1935 the GPU in Magnitogorsk did not do much more than observe activities. Beginning in 1936, Scott was surprised to learn that the secret police had begun accusing party members whose brigades were seen as unproductive of being kulaks (wealthy peasants who Stalin vowed to kill), kulak sympathizers, or spies working for foreign governments. As a result of these accusations, thousands of accused managers and bureaucrats, many of whom Scott knew to be quite capable, were taken from their homes at night and taken to forced labor camps, where many died. By the end of 1937, these purges (elimination of people who were considered opponents of the Communist party) had reached such a frenzy that all foreign workers, including Scott, were accused of being spies and forced to leave the country. Although Scott witnessed two cases in which individuals were rightly accused of criminal actions, he finally came to believe that the purpose of the purges was to create a terrified population that would work hard and obey the directions of the Communist party.