

Observations in North Russia

Written for the Western Home Monthly by C. W. Thompson

THOROUGH explanation into the state of affairs at the present time in Russia would fill volumes, but it must be borne in mind that in so vast a country the deplorable condition does not apply to all the provinces. In the vicinity of Archangel, the people have so much industry to keep them busy that good order prevails to a greater extent than would be imagined after such an upheaval in government. It is the intention here to set down the impressions formed, after a ten months' stay in the locality, of that portion in the north with its rich natural wealth and of the people who inhabit that region.



Solovitsky Monastery—Nicholasky Church on the Kond Island.

Nine days' travel by water, of an average from the British coast, the trip to Archangel by this route takes one through two oceans and two seas, consecutively—the North Sea, the North Atlantic ocean, the Arctic ocean and the White sea. From the latter, which is scarcely free of floating ice from September until June, is a further half day's travel up the Dwina river before reaching the harbor of the city. The river here, strange to say, allowing that it forms part of the Delta, is very narrow, merely a dredged passage of sufficient width for two large steamers to pass, whereas above the city itself it widens out into a great navigable stream. Along the banks for miles on either side until reaching the large basin which forms the fine harbor are piled many thousands of feet of lumber, lying there idle for the want of transportation to the outer world. Many saw-mills are also passed en route, some idle and others in active operation adding to the amount of lumber on hand, and providing for trade which is expected to open up as soon as normal conditions are resumed, whereas, less than a hundred miles up stream people may be seen in the tedious task of hewing their boards out with axes, or by the equally slow method of sawing by hand.

The first objects which catch the eye on sighting the city of Archangel, are the gilded minarets of the many church towers. With the sun shining, and from a distance the place gives one a quick thought for the storied Orient. It is customary, it may be added for every church building in Russia, no matter the size to be thus made prominent, after the architecture adopted by the Greek-Catholic faith there, so largely followed. For lack of quantities of stone and brick, the wood for large buildings and churches is often carved and turned, then painted white in imitation, which gives them a solid and imposing appearance. The Russian as a rule devoutly follows his religion, and seldom fails to attend the Sunday services. Religion with him is not only a matter for Sunday, but is observed during the week as well. It would indeed be unusual, on entering a dwelling, not to find an ikon the first object which meets one's gaze from its stand in the corner opposite the doorway. Before it, on coming into a room, the custom is seldom failed to bow in obeisance, to make the sign of the cross, and to mutter a prayer. Frequent religious holidays are held, and occasional

well attended processions are held in the streets, ending with church service in the Cathedral. A Russian regiment before leaving for the front, is formed up in a hollow square for benediction, and blessed with holy water from the priest's hands.

Archangel is a city of approximately thirty thousand people, not including the suburbs of Smolney, Solombola, Holmagory, and Bakaritza. The principal streets are cobbled with stones gathered from along the shores of the river. An electric railway, operating small four wheeled German made cars, provides transportation. The private vehicle is the "Droisky" or squat little cab, seating two passengers and the driver. In winter

appearance. It strikes one, that these must be zealous people to attempt fine parks for the four short months of mild weather when they are possible to be enjoyed. Further evidence is the pleasant promenade for almost the length of the waterfront, which affords a fine view across the harbor and the shipping at anchor and in dock. The city has splendid wharf accommodation, although there are no dry docks of sufficient size to accommodate large boats, nor supplies of coal for their needs. The railroad engines are wood-burning for the most part, and are of lighter build than the Canadian type.

Archangel is connected with Petrograd and the south by rail via Vologda; with Moscow by water to Kotlas, two hundred and fifty miles up stream, and thence by rail. The operations of the Allied forces in this region during the winter months of 1918-19 were greatly hindered by the lack of rail communication to the Murmansk coast where the port is open the year round. Archangel itself during the period mentioned, kept in touch by water with the outside world until well on into January, by means of icebreaking steamships, although ordinary vessels are unable to get through from October until May.

Russian young people have most of the amusements indulged in by the younger set in Canada. Their skating rink is a part of the river cleared off. Several very high "Gurkahs" (toboggan slides) are yearly erected, the principal one being built on a side-street connecting with the river, right off Troitsky Prospect. Down this they slide along the prepared pathway for a quarter of a mile, out into the frozen river. The "Gurkah" is well lit up by electric lights along the route and a crowd of people nightly attend the pastime. One might well call Archangel a modern city, for as can be gathered, electricity is their mode of lighting, and water-works have been installed.

Cut off from extensive fishing during the months of long winter except by the

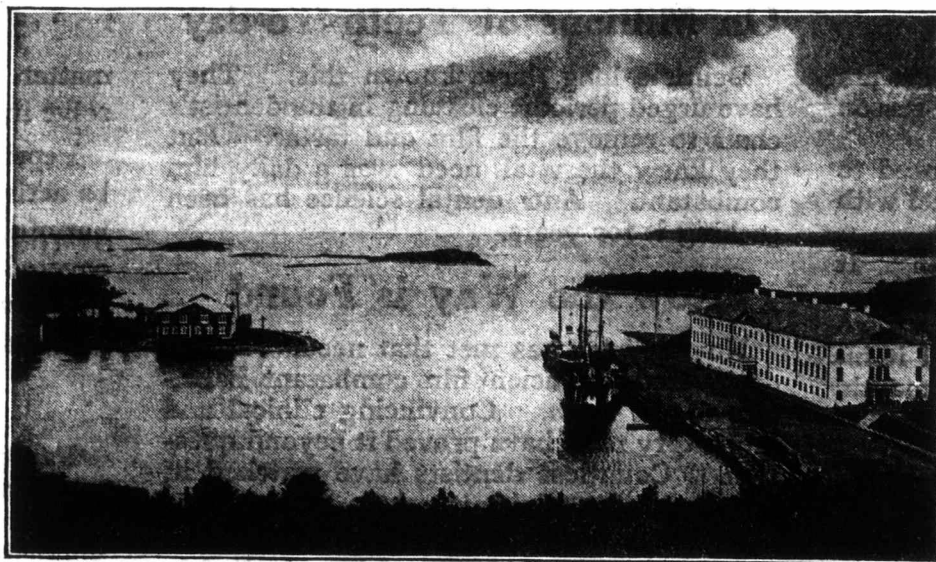
supply of furs. During February and March teams of reindeer driven by Laplanders in their gaudy one-piece fur garments trimmed and inlaid with brightly colored cloth, come down from their frozen homes to sell their furs. They bring sealskin in abundance and many fine fox furs. These may be bought very cheaply, the main difficulty preventing their easy use arises from the poor facilities for curing the hides. When this is overcome and transportation becomes less inexpedient there is no doubt that the future will see great developments in this section of Russia for trade with other countries.

Going inland from Archangel up the Dwina one experiences a change in the life of the people and much of interest. For two hundred and fifty miles, the range of the writer's knowledge, as far as the before mentioned town Kotlas, there are a great number of villages, large and small, on the banks of the river. The territory is well watered by good sized tributaries emptying into the main stream. A mile and a half strip of land on either side of the river marks the limit for cultivable land, the rest forming a stretch of mostly soggy and marshy ground. The trip up the river is pleasant. On some places, however, sandbars give reason for caution, but on the whole the river is like a lake trip. The countryside is in the main wooded with small pine trees, and is low lying. In places there are steep, chalky cliffs rising to a height of forty or fifty feet, yet in others is a sandy shore. It is a great navigable waterway with long stretches, and is in some places, over a mile in width.

The peasant people who inhabit this district are farmers in a small way with perhaps a few cows and horses, while some of the more fortunate possess sheep. The tame fowl, as well as the horses, are noticeably small, and the latter are not quite the size of our western ponies.

The customs of the country are very simple and their farm implements crude. From the land small crops of flax, potatoes and beans are gathered, for the soil is light. The people live, and no more. They spin their own linen and hew down trees to build themselves dwellings. The only tool used practically to build a house in these parts is an axe, with which both men and women are adept. There are no stores, no proper medical attention, simply what the people get is from the land. For all that, they seem contented enough. The women are very strong and hard-working, helping the men on the land by day and busy with needle-work in the evening.

These people in this part of Russia are not Bolsheviks as we understand the term, merely simple people disposed to be friendly with everyone, and only anxious to be left unmolested. They are unable to defend themselves or to set up a government. They have neither sufficient wealth or knowledge, but are forced to accept the rule of those set in authority over them. Happy will be the day for them when stable government is restored to forward their interests and establish their right to live.



Solovits Monastery. View on the Bay of Good Receipts.

some fair sized stores are the main buildings of interest to the casual observer, although well patronized restaurants draw attention by the sound of the music within, of the orchestras floating on to the street. The public baths are features, because of the interest taken in them by the public, and are different from baths as we understand them, as the process of washing is more by the use of steam than by warm water.

The mind of the uneducated class of Russian is generally conceded to be on the verge of childish. This, however, applies almost to all uneducated people, and nothing delights them more than to be enthralled by exciting melodrama or amused by the antics of performing clowns. However, in this country as in most of others, an eye for beauty and the desire for pleasing surroundings prevail. This is evidenced in the attempt to make the city as attractive as possible; statues of notables are placed in outstanding positions; the street lamps would do credit to any European city, and the parks they have made, greatly improve the city's

tedious method of fishing through holes in the ice, the inhabitants bring in a product which is likely to acquire a large return for the country; viz, an immense



Law Courts, Archangel