EROSION THROUGH INDIFFERENCE

Nelson Sees No Russian Revolt

By DOUG JOHNSON

"Since I did not have time in the one week I was in Russia to question my first impressions, I feel free to talk," Dr. William H. Nelson, Associate Professor of History, told a Hanszen College audience Thursday, March 7. Dr. Nelson entertained his listeners with some offhand comments about his trip to the Soviet Union last summer—including a comparison of student life at Rice and in Russia.

His picture of Russian university life was unhappy; there was little social life or leisure—and much "grinding." Russian students are always impressed with their privileges in attending the university. The whole dreary picture, he said, resembled Rice to a surprising degree.

DR. NELSON FOUND that the West has a misconception of Russian life—it is more pleasant than their political structure seems to warrant. The people are casual and friendly; they go out of their way to do things for you, such as to refill your vodka glass when you seem unhappy.

The other side of this hospitality, he said, is a terrible inefficiency; yet this inefficiency is really a liberating force, for it lessens the power of rule presumed from the official outline.

The Russians care what you think of their way of life, not what you think of them personally; they dislike being considered backward, though they are in reality.

It is common for many families to share one room. Going from Leningrad to Moscow, Dr. Nelson saw only two private cars, and these had Swedish and Belgian license plates; he saw only eight restaurants in Moscow. Yet these conditions are a deliberate policy; economic progress is concentrated on railroads, water, and now truck transportation. Dr. Nelson noticed signs of radical technological advance in sharp contrast to the primitive living conditions.

There is a tradition of woman labor in Russia—and "the women are formidable." Femininity is considered bourgeois. There are, Dr. Nelson said, some pretty girls in Leningrad, which is more "Western" than Moscow. In Leningrad, he noticed a growing hunger for Western products.

Dr. Nelson saw an enormous vitality in the Russian people; more than in the West Europeans. There is a kind of collective proprietorship with seemingly enthusiastic support in the cities—bus fares are paid on the honor system, with few evasions.

There is, he observed, a surprising amount of free discussion; the Russians think the West is misguided, but they will listen to criticism. Life is grim, but the Russians say that it is better than ten years ago and that is their standard of comparison. The Russians themselves, however, aren't grim—they live apart from their grim life.

When asked about Russian youth, Dr. Nelson said the Western-orientated youth were not politically-minded; the West for them consisted of such things as Louis Armstrong and clothes. In his "vodka-befogged" talks, the Russians were not eager to discuss.

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cuss politics, though most of them really believed that communism is destined to win world domination.

Dr. Nelson said that the Russians are most interested in bettering their standard of living and world peace (Russia hasn’t forgotten her 25 million casualties in the Second World War). Russians asked him, “Why is the United States mad at us? She was our friend during the war.” The average Russian thinks that the U.S. has been seduced by Germany (the most hated country in Russia) and business interests.

Russians want to catch up with the “vitality” of the West; they don’t brag about space, but they are proud of their astronauts. Like Americans, they think that all people are essentially alike.

Religion in Russia is no more evident than in New York or Paris. The Russians don’t seem to lament the absence of elections—they are frustrated over a determined future; but, he said, so are Westerners. Dr. Nelson sees no revolution coming to Russia, but he noticed an erosion of the present system in the people’s political indifference.