During the early Depression years, Vorse's precarious monetary condition was balanced by joyous release from her isolation of the twenties. She returned to the pattern of constant travel and reporting she had begun after Joe O'Brien's death. She also turned again to other females for emotional support. Vorse had found little in common with most women of her own generation, so few of whom shared her radical politics or overarching ambition. But beginning in her mid-fifties, she became close to several admiring younger women as deviant as herself. During these same years, although she still worried over her children's welfare, her daughter's marriage brought a measure of financial relief. The publication of her tenth book also lifted her spirits.

In the early thirties, Vorse returned South to cover stories in Alabama, and in Kentucky, where she was expelled from the state by night riders. Accompanied by her new radical women friends, she also reported the revolt of farmers and the unemployed. In all these labor stories, as at Passaic and Gastonia, she had an opportunity to study Communist activists at close hand. First privately in 1929, and then publicly in 1933, Vorse decisively rejected Soviet-style communism and the American leadership of its followers.

Even in this, her stand, as always, was at odds with mainstream liberalism. Vorse differentiated between the high priests of the party and the rank-and-file members who in the early thirties often led the battle of the poor against reactionary forces. She discovered that most of the labor activists working with the party knew or cared little about the scuf-
flying for personal power or the doctrinal debates that were so dear to party officers in New York. Her labor experience of the past twenty years had convinced her that militant left protest was necessary in order to move the country’s political center to address urgent social problems, and she knew that in the early Depression years Communist organizers were among the most courageous and committed workers in the field. Vorse decided to continue her association with party organizers she admired, while distinguishing between their struggle and the pronouncements of party leaders. She would hold to her wider vision, even through the perilous 1950s, despite its negative effect on her reputation and popularity.

From North Carolina, Vorse headed directly to the art colonies of New Mexico, there to finish a novel based on her experience in Gastonia. Both Mary Austin in Santa Fe and Mabel Dodge in Taos had offered her a room where she could work. Vorse longed for a quiet and inexpensive haven. During the three months she spent in the Southwest, her writing went easily. She polished off a few lollipops to pay her way. “The days are round and full like eggs,” she wrote in her diary. “I have a lovely feeling of coming back to the small niche in the world I made for myself, and from which I was absent for a while. . . . I have a feeling of delight in getting back to my own quiet place. The solidity of daily work.”

By the mid-twenties, a colony of American writers and artists also flourished in Mexico City. John Dos Passos had told Vorse about his happy weeks spent in Mexico in 1926. Mexico especially appealed to Vorse as a writing retreat because life there was cheap as well as redemptive. She began Spanish lessons while in Santa Fe and used the proceeds from her recent sales of lollipops to pay off the loans accumulated during the bleak period from 1922 to 1929.

Just before she headed south, Vorse received a telegram from her daughter. Ellen announced her pending marriage, neglected to tell her mother the name of her husband-to-be, and requested funds. Vorse sent fifty dollars for a dress and a wedding present. Now she had eighty dollars left, enough to last her four weeks, she judged. After a brief visit with Josie and Joel in Texas, Vorse arrived in Mexico City in mid-February.

She took a room with a Mexican family whose bathroom was placed off limits to protect the privacy of a turtle dove nesting on the floor behind the toilet. “I have suddenly run into a dazzling happiness,” Vorse crowed, “just like that of my student days in Paris.” As was her custom, she wrote each morning while lying in bed. She spent the afternoons and evenings with members of the radical coterie assembled about the American writer Carleton Beals. Sometimes she walked across town to watch the artist
Diego Rivera at work. But Vorse's closest companion in Mexico City was Dorothy Day, who would some years later win fame as the founder of the Catholic Worker movement, an event greatly influenced by Vorse's effect on Day. The two women had first met in the Village in 1917. During their time together in Mexico, they formed a deep friendship that would join their disparate lives for over thirty years.

Twenty-three years younger than Vorse, Day had been radicalized in 1916 when she heard Elizabeth Gurley Flynn speak at a fund-raising rally in support of the Mesabi miners. Soon after, Day joined the staff of the Masses. Arrested as a suffrage picket at the White House, she went on a ten-day hunger strike until released from jail. When she fell in love with a grumpy, unemployed actor and became pregnant, he insisted on abortion. Creeping home after the illegal operation, she discovered he had left town. In 1919, still smitten, she pursued him to Chicago. There, while visiting a sick woman friend at a Wobbly boarding house, Day was swept up by a Department of Justice raid and arrested and jailed on a false charge of prostitution. This experience drove her farther left.

Precisely like Vorse, Day endured a desperately unhappy winter of 1922-23. Ironically, Day had then worked as secretary to Robert Minor in Chicago, where he and Lydia Gibson had moved after Minor left Vorse in the summer of 1922. Day had found his melodramatic style amusing: "When I took dictation from Bob, he kept telling his friends that he was being followed. Pacing up and down the room, glancing out of the window he would say, 'At this moment of writing there is a man standing in the doorway across the street who had been shadowing me for the past week.' This was repeated in each letter."

Vorse served the admiring younger woman as a political model of purpose and zest. "Like a warrior scenting battles," Day wrote of Vorse, "she dashes off for the fray. . . . But her movements are never dashing. Rather, she quietly appears where labor trouble is, and gets to work. For months she wanders around from strike headquarters to picket line, to jails, to courts, to the homes of strikers. And then she spends further months (with her feet higher than her head, as though it helped her to think) immobile for hours, dictating pamphlets, stories, articles and novels about the trouble." In Mexico, Day's secretarial assistance helped Vorse to write the last chapters of Strike!3

When Vorse returned to Provincetown she found her house full of young people. All the children came home that summer, including the new addition to the family, Ellen's pianist husband Marvin Waldman. At first, Vorse welcomed her return to the routine of children and life in
the resort setting. She settled into a familiar pattern of writing, play, and housework. "It has been a good year," she mused. "A year lived selfishly."4

The literary and artistic colony at Provincetown assumed a new shape that summer as a younger generation came to join those who had founded the Provincetown Players fifteen years earlier. Edmund Wilson and his new bride moved into Eugene O'Neill's old house. Katy and John Dos Passos were in nearby Truro. Of the old Provincetown crew, there were Susan Glaspell and Norman Matson, Hazel Hawthorne, and the poet Harry Kemp. Unlike earlier times, when the Provincetown summer colony had centered its activity around family and small children, the adult gatherings of the 1930s were more hard-drinking affairs, but with the conversation still directed toward literary or political analysis. As before, the group usually worked until mid-afternoon, then joined in shifting combinations to swim, sun, or hike the dunes, before their evening frolics. Vorse knew her social skills were a bit rusty after her travail of the twenties. "I have not nearly enough relations in my life. No one near to me. No one. I talk to dozens—But no intimacies. No loves." A few months later, she added: "It is a sad fact I do not like men as much as I did. . . . I have no weather eye out for men who would naturally like me . . . the shutting on life of one of the doors."5

By summer's end, Vorse's hope for a new family harmony dissolved. She and twenty-three-year-old Ellen quarreled bitterly about Ellen's neglect of daily chores and about the noisy crowd of young visitors who disturbed Vorse as she tried to write. That summer, Vorse developed a constant pain in her side. Despite the doctor's reassurance, she worried that she might be dying of some obscure malady. To escape Ellen's "pullings and howlings . . . her scenes and excitements," Vorse asked her sixteen-year-old son Joel to row her out every morning to a friend's boat in the harbor where she could work in isolation. Finally, she relapsed into hysteria. "Suddenly, I go to pieces," she wrote in her journal. "I cry and cry. I can no longer carry the burden. I cannot go alone as I have in the past doing everything and only unkindness for a reward. I feel my own inadequacy as a mother. . . . I feel as if I were sinking and calling for help to people who answer, 'Don't make such a horrible noise.'" The support of the children was a financial burden as well, during this first Depression year. Vorse borrowed money to pay the previous year's interest on the mortgage. She fantasized that next season she would rent her house and "go to some quiet place where I can work. . . . Here, in Provincetown, maybe."6

In the early fall of 1930, Horace Liveright published Strike! Following the chronology of actual events in Gastonia, Vorse described working
and living conditions, the discomfort of the few southern liberals, the host of labor spies, the wavering morale of the strikers, the shootings, the deaths, the trials, the vigilant mobs. Strike! is marked by its theme of women's courage and strength, a point that escaped the notice of reviewers. The young strike organizer, Irma Rankin, who represents Vera Buch, and Mamie Lewis, the name given to Ella May Wiggins, are the fearless characters about whom the action revolves. Rankin knows that "the women [workers] are pluckier than the men." Rankin and a male reporter wrangle over this. He finds Rankin's unwillingness to subordinate herself to the male strike leader unsettling. In Strike!, Vorse described the real scene in Gastonia, where Vera Buch and the other female organizers derided Fred Beal's lack of organization and resisted his demand that he be given direction of a strike in which it was women who "manned" the dangerous picket lines.  

The story is told from the perspective of two eastern journalists, Rogers and Hoskins. Both men represent Vorse in various stages of her life. Like Vorse at Lawrence in 1912, Rogers came to report his first strike believing that the only reason the "good" people of the community opposed the strikers was that they lacked understanding of the facts. Hoskins, however, is a cynical veteran of the labor movement. He chides Rogers: "There's no use being shocked about a thing that always happens. Whenever the workers make their initial revolt the instinctive action of the comfortable people is to put down the rebellion with violence—any violence, all violence." Like Vorse, Hoskins "made a good living as a special writer for popular magazines, and would have been well off if he could have left the labor movement alone." But "let a strike come along, and there he'd be," always experiencing "the worker's willingness to fight as more exciting than anything else in the world."

Her decision to reveal the growth of her philosophy through two male characters is significant. As a female labor journalist in a male profession, she realized that speaking through a male reporter would legitimate her views in a way that a woman character could not. Vorse had always deplored her work as a popular fiction writer—a domain judged appropriate for women authors—and yet made her living from it. In her role as labor journalist—her deepest interest—she felt forced to pose as a man. Sex-role conflict followed her even into the symbol making central to the writer's work.

The novel received wide attention. Mike Gold praised it in the New Masses as a glorious example of "proletarian realism." Liveright issued the book with a detachable paper band, which proclaimed Gold's belief that
“it was a burning and imperishable epic.” This worried Sinclair Lewis who voiced his fear in the *Nation* that an endorsement by the Communist Gold might prejudice readers against the book. Carl Haessler wrote Vorse that Lewis was “praising you as the very best of all the writers on the textile strikes in the South.” The *New Republic* and the *New Yorker* reviewers were strongly positive; the *Saturday Review of Literature* and the *New York Times Book Review* gave mixed, but sympathetic, support. The book sold well, despite its bewildering number of characters and unwieldy presentation of the southern mill-hand’s dialect. Vorse was pleased to learn it would be published in German, Russian, and Japanese for distribution abroad.8

*Strike!* appeared in the ultrarevolutionary Third Period (1928–1935) of American Communist history, when Stalin was erasing his opposition in the Soviet Union. In Russia, cooperation with farmers and traders came to an end; the corollary was that Communist parties abroad must conform by opposing an alliance with democratic socialists. The new turn to the left included an attempt by the American Communist movement to appeal to intellectuals and writers, a group they had previously scorned for its resistance to party discipline and tendency toward independent thinking.

The party attempted a ham-handed authority over literature and social comment during the thirties. Overblown, intemperate attacks on liberals and independent radicals appeared in party-influenced publications, as Communist leaders denounced intellectuals unwilling to adhere to the party line. Yet many American thinkers were moving left during this time of unprecedented economic collapse and consequent misery. The party’s authoritarianism and slavish admiration of the Soviet Union repelled many intellectuals, but at the same time, serious writers were attracted by the party’s willingness to fight for the deprived. As one rank-and-file Communist activist explained years later: “The Communists seemed like the only group doing anything about everything” in 1930 and 1931. With nowhere else to go, dozens of American writers joined party-affiliated groups, supported party actions, and even participated in the debate over the appropriate content and structure of “proletarian culture.”9

As author of a book that sympathetically portrayed the workers’ struggle in Gastonia, Vorse was pursued by Communists eager to build a coalition with non-Communist writers. Jack Stachel, the party’s organizational secretary, and Mike Gold and Joseph Freeman, editors of the *New Masses*, frequently “plagued” her, Vorse wrote, to attend party-led meetings and to write for party publications. Vorse resisted these efforts. Through long con-
tact with the Communist left, she was more aware than most of the petty quarrels and infighting then convulsing the party elite, as Earl Browder slowly gained a lead over William Foster in competition for the top position. She agreed with Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, another old-timer on the left, who wrote Vorse in 1930: “The movement is a mess, torn by factionalism and scandal, and led by self-seekers, with one or two exceptions. I am glad to be out of it all.” The American Communist Party, Vorse wrote in her journal, was headed by functionaries with “closed minds, so certain, so dull . . . miserable, pathetic, static. They bore me, bore me, bore me.”

More important, Vorse shunned the party because she had become deeply critical of the evolution of socialism in the Soviet Union. She knew that the GPU, the Russian political police, was in place, increasingly at Stalin’s disposal, and ready for large-scale repression of dissent. The first “show trials” had begun. Stalin had also gained control of the trade-union apparatus. But the Soviet betrayal of her socialist ideals that most horrified her was the state’s attack on the Russian peasantry, which led to at least ten million deaths between 1928 and 1933 during the collectivization of agriculture and the famine that followed. The realization of this catastrophic barbarism marked a turning point in her political development. Vorse was now certain that Bolshevik-style socialism had become but another form of despotism; she was unforgiving of the American Communist leaders who supported and defended a red dictatorship. “I find myself in a bourgeois frame of mind about the kulaks,” she wrote in her diary in early 1931. “[The peasants] for the fault of having a wrong psychology have been killed or sent to forced labor. The moment you get any large group living in virtual slavery (and for ideological reasons) the world should say, ‘Why bathe humanity in blood if we still have to keep enslaved a considerable number of people so that the new civilization can march?’ . . . Who cares which class rules so long as the sum of injustice remains the same?” Later that year she added: “I am a communist because I don’t see anything else to be. But I am a communist who hates Communists and Communism.”

Vorse did continue her friendship with Communist-affiliated but independent activist-intellectuals like Adelaide and Charles Walker. In mid-September 1931, Vorse was invited by them to accompany Theodore Dreiser and a group of other writers on a trip to Kentucky. Dreiser’s group intended to publicize the denial of civil liberties in Harlan County, where a battle raged between union miners and coal operators. Vorse agreed to go. She did so more reluctantly than Dos Passos, who had not experienced
southern hostility first hand. But on September 17, at a Provincetown party with Dos Passos, Vorse made a sudden decision to travel to England instead.

"The British Empire has cracked right before one's eyes," she chortled just before she left.12 The British economic crisis had toppled the Labour government and had led twelve thousand men of the British fleet in harbor at Invergordon to mutiny in protest against pay reductions, which had fallen in undue proportion on the lowest ranks of seamen. No Anglophile, Vorse felt righteous glee at the threat to British imperialism. The unthinkable, a British naval mutiny, combined with the possibility of the unbelievable, the felling of British bankers, was too good a story for Vorse to miss. With assignments from the Federated Press and Harper's, she sailed a few days later.

By the time Vorse landed in Scotland, pay cuts had been reduced and the immediate crisis resolved. The wider national crisis was not solved. After the demise of the second Labour government in 1931, the extremes of class inequality persisted, with almost three million unemployed. Two-thirds of British families received one-third of the aggregate income. The old set of old boys ruled in Britain, unimaginative, cautious, eminently respectable.

After seven weeks, Vorse left with the conviction that the Labour Party leaders were no better than the Tories and even more pretentious. Socialism could not be built "almost behind the backs of the ruling class," she wrote. "Personally, I belong to those who believe you can't sneak up on a nation with a program of socialism. Anything like real socialism will mean expropriation for the working classes." For Vorse, her 1931 trip to Britain would always be symbolized on one side "by the brave rhetoric of the Labor Party Conference and [on the other by] the sight of the King and Queen in their glass and gold coach—bowing to the cheering people on their way to open the new Tory Parliament." Two crowds, equally bamboozled.13

Wanting to report events in Germany "before the deluge," Vorse spent two weeks in Berlin before returning home. In the Reichstag election of September 1930, the Nazis had become the second largest political party. The German Communists, on orders from the Comintern, refused to align themselves with the Social Democrats against Hitler. The Communists believed the Nazi regime would be a temporary phenomenon, which would pave the way to their own seizure of power. Paramilitarism and political violence soared. By the end of 1932 several hundred Germans
had died and thousands had been injured in clashes between political parties.

In Berlin, Vorse spent most of her time with Louis Lochner, then the chief of the Berlin Bureau of the Associated Press, earlier, a founder of and, like Vorse, reporter for American labor's Federated Press. Vorse and Lochner attended a Nazi–Communist student debate. She wrote, “I, who have seen plenty of crowds on the edge of trouble, have never sat through so prickly an evening.” After four chill hours of talk, the opposing factions in the hall began to scuffle. “Then a gentleman in the gallery dropped a chair from two stories up—just quietly dropped it,” she wrote. The police came instantly. Vorse went away, sober and breathless. No one knows what will happen, she reported, but “cataclysm is at hand . . . the end of an epoch. The next act will be starker. It will be steel instead of rococo marble,” she warned the readers of the New Yorker.¹⁴

Shortly after her return to Provincetown, Vorse received a telegram from Adelaide and Charles Walker:

Kentucky miners face crisis distribution of food account armed thugs. We are sending trucks of flour and vegetables into Harlan to test fundamental rights to feed strikers. Asking well known persons including [Charles] Beard and Sherwood Anderson to go in on truck. Will you go too. Probably starting Tuesday Wednesday night next week. Want you very much and sure expenses can be raised.¹⁵

During Vorse's absence in Europe, Theodore Dreiser had led his writers' committee, which included Dos Passos and the Walkers, into Kentucky to publicize the terror unleashed against striking miners. A Kentucky jury promptly indicted each member of Dreiser’s group for criminal syndicalism, an extraditable offense carrying a possible sentence of twenty-one years in prison. When the same jury indicted Dreiser for adultery, he assured the press that he was impotent and thus innocent. The sex scandal attracted more national attention than the exposure of conditions in the Harlan coalfields might have otherwise received. As a result of the publicity, a group of charity organizations in Kentucky initiated relief efforts, which saved some miners and their families from death by malnutrition and disease.¹⁶

The tale of “Bloody Harlan County” during the Depression is today an American epic of labor struggle, memorialized by one of the most

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enduring of protest songs, “Which Side Are You On?” For several years the violent class war that raged in Harlan and Bell counties forced all the inhabitants to choose a side. In 1932, Harlan miners, who composed two-thirds of the county’s population, existed in feudal-like peonage, their lives bound by the lords who owned the coalfields. Sixty-one percent of the county’s population lived in unincorporated company towns, governed by the mine superintendent and policed by deputy sheriffs paid by the coal company. Union organizers or sympathizers were immediately evicted and fired. A recent scholarly study of Harlan’s history in the 1930s concludes: “Harlan’s coal firms were not just running a business in Harlan County; they were running the county. . . . The few small farmers were about the only truly free people in the county.”

Cut off from political action by fraudulent election practices, the miners fought back through the institution of unionism. When a 10 percent wage cut was announced in February 1931, the local miners decided they might as well die fighting as die of starvation. Looting of grocery stores by hungry miners began. In May, at the famous Battle of Evarts, where one thousand shots were exchanged in the course of about thirty minutes, several deputies and miners were killed. The appearance of the National Guard halted picketing, while mass arrests eliminated union leadership. The United Mine Workers called it quits after its last public meeting was dispersed by deputies throwing tear-gas canisters into the orderly crowd of assembled workers. Given the choice of starving, leaving the county, or going back to work, all but about a thousand angry miners had reentered the mines at reduced wages by the summer of 1931.

At this point the Communists’ newly formed dual union, the National Miners Union (NMU), entered Harlan to organize the embittered minority of workers who had refused to relinquish their unionism or sign yellow-dog contracts. But the Communist union struggle in Harlan was doomed from the start. Lacking organizers and relief money, and recruiting unemployed workers who could exert no economic pressure on the operators, the Communists were in fact leading what was more a political demonstration than a strike.

Vorse “mulled and stewed” for several days as she pondered her reply to the Walkers’ telegram asking her to join the second group of writers to be sent into Bloody Harlan, this time to bring food to the blacklisted miners and to test again the state of civil liberties. Vorse was frankly afraid. Five months earlier she had decided not to join Dreiser’s group, partly because she feared its members would be jailed, or worse. After her experience in Marion and Gastonia, Vorse fully understood the nature of southern
justice. Moreover, she suspected that the Communists would deliberately use the writers’ committee to provoke a violent confrontation in the hope of further radicalizing the workers. She did not want to be caught in any resultant maelstrom of terror. Dos Passos came to her Provincetown home three nights in a row to help her reach a decision. He was cautious, but supportive of her need to help the hungry people of Harlan. Finally, her political commitment, as well as her journalistic curiosity, won. Before she left Provincetown for New York, she wrote in her diary: “There is all this talk about appealing to the nation. One good story syndicated with the Hearst papers will do more to crack things open. The people can’t visualize [the hunger]. The miners are starving. The children are starving. I do not want to go very much yet I suppose I will go.”

Vorse traveled to Harlan as a representative for the Federated Press. She knew the fate of the last two Federated Press reporters to enter Harlan. In mid-August, twenty-one-year-old Boris Israel had been removed from a courtroom by three sheriffs who threatened his life and shot him in the leg as he escaped. The Federated Press next sent Jessie O’Connor, who remembers that when she arrived, she was handed a note from “100% Americans and we don’t mean maybe.” The note told her “that the other redneck reporter got what was coming to him, so don’t let the sun go down on you here.” O’Connor wisely fled Kentucky at once. Her husband, Harvey O’Connor, telegraphed Forrest Bailey, of the American Civil Liberties Union: “Considering going to Harlan tonight. Have you anyone there?” Bailey replied: “We have nobody in Harlan. Farewell. Forward last messages.” Even critical journalists of the nonradical variety were forbidden entry to Harlan. In late July, before the Federated Press reporters had appeared, a Virginia editor had been ambushed and shot in the ankle.

In New York, Vorse conferred with Edmund Wilson, who had also consented to join the writers’ committee bringing food to Harlan. She and Wilson won a pledge from the Walkers that no inflammatory Communist rhetoric would be publicly expressed by anyone who might travel with the writers. On February 6 she wrote in her diary: “I get a very bad impression of the outfit. The men going... are all soft. They are hairsplitters. The same old radical ebb and flow & wailing around. I feel I’m a fool to go. That I’m going to get into a meaningless mess. Time taking. Nerve racking.”

The next day, Vorse left for Knoxville, where the writers would assemble. She met Wilson in New York’s Pennsylvania Station. He found her “dispirited,” worried about being spotted and followed by coal company detectives. “It’s different [in Harlan] from up here,” Vorse warned.

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him again. "Those people—are likely to mob you!" She refused to join the rest of the group until the train was ready to pull out of the station. On board, she found Charles Walker very excited. Wilson remembered that Walker's "mouth opened, and a program from the Daily Worker fell out, making Mary and me very uneasy." Walker urged the group to insist on the right to free assembly and free speech when they reached the coalfields. Immensely scornful of Walker's optimistic judgment as to what might await the group in Kentucky, Vorse withdrew on the train into silent contemplation of the New Yorker and Redbook while Wilson and Walker discussed the ideas of Marx and Henry George.20

In a dingy room in Knoxville's Farragut Hotel, watched by detectives outside the door, the assembled party held a tense discussion under a bald electric light bulb hanging on a cord from the ceiling. The best-known writers in the group, beside Vorse and Wilson, were the New Republic editor Malcolm Cowley, the broadcaster and journalist Quincy Howe, and the novelist Waldo Frank. Cowley wrote that, except for Vorse, "a novelist with radical sympathies who had been reporting strikes for thirty years, . . . [the rest of us] had no experience in labor disputes. Waldo Frank had written more books than the rest of us, and we made him our chairman."

John Henry Hammond, the young radical who was heir to a Vanderbilt fortune, Benjamin Lieder, the Paramount newsreel cameraman who five years later was to be killed while flying a plane for the Spanish Loyalists, Harold Hickerson, a New York playwright, and Allan Taub, a Communist attorney, who had recently been expelled from the coalfields in return for his pledge never to return, also joined the group. Another member, Liston Oak, whom Vorse had last seen in Gastonia, when they both had been arrested just moments before Ella May Wiggins was killed, looked gaunt and nervous. Wilson noticed that Oak's hands were shaking, probably because Oak, like Vorse, knew what they faced. The two other women on the committee were Elsa Reed Mitchell, a retired physician from California, and Polly Boyden, whose militant pronouncements annoyed Vorse. Years later, Adelaide Walker remembered of the group: "Wilson was apolitical; taking him was a mistake. Cowley was overboard for the Communist Party, and Polly Boyden was wildly CP."21

Drawing on her experience of labor conflict, Vorse told the members of the group to leave behind every piece of literature they might have with them. She warned that their luggage and persons were sure to be searched, and any radical or suspicious literature could endanger them all. The rest of the committee chuckled at her fears. Twenty-one years later, she still felt angry when she recalled how her cautionary instructions were "met
with the patronizing assurances that men give to an hysterical woman.” She was unable to convince them to leave their papers behind. Vorse felt as if she “possessed some dark truth that she could not communicate to the others. They were innocent, babbling about holding meetings and visiting mining camps. They had not seen a Southern mob in a killing mood.” Her first encounter with the committee members increased her rising sense of doom.

Early the next morning, the party drove in private cars to La Follette, Tennessee, where they ate some spongy hotdogs at the local soda fountain. Vorse had great difficulty in persuading young Hammond not to play the jukebox. A crowd of silent men watched them. Vorse’s group then learned that Harry Simms, the nineteen-year-old Jewish NMU organizer from Massachusetts who had left Pineville that morning to meet the caravan, had been attacked. Simms was walking near the railroad tracks when two sheriffs riding a handcar shot him in the stomach and left him to bleed to death. Most of the committee members expressed shock and indignation at the news of Simms. They were still so innocent, Vorse thought, still so sure that no one would dare harm such a distinguished crowd as themselves. “This is no class struggle,” Vorse told Wilson. “This is class war.”

Wishing she had never come, Vorse wrote, “I had a gritty feeling that I alone among all . . . [of us] knew we were heading for trouble . . . . When Southerners make a threat, they mean it.” The little entourage moved up the mountain, the food trucks lumbering behind. The young Kentuckian driving her car was armed. He whistled in amazement when he was told that none of the men in Vorse’s party carried guns.

After a time they came to a crossroads where a crowd of about thirty silent men with rifles and shotguns stood. She and Wilson took a short stroll while the rest of the committee bought lunch. To lessen their anxiety, they talked of other things. As Wilson remembered it: “Mary and I walked up and down—Mary’s troubles with her children—Ellen had come down with her husband and intimated that she wished Mary were dead so that they could have the house, Mary had intimated a little less cruelly that she wished Ellen were dead—we discussed marriage, husbands and wives who both did things and competed with one another.—Liston Oak [joined us]. What does this remind you of, Mary? (He meant Gastonia.)” Finally the trucks came and they went on. They learned then that one of the trucks carrying clothing had been stopped and overturned.

At the Pineville city limits, another silent armed force of deputies watched them pass. The town square looked like it was under siege. Cowley remarked he hadn’t seen so many guns since France in 1917. On
top of Town Hall Vorse saw a nest of machine guns. Conspicuously armed men were everywhere. The nervous banter between committee members faltered to a halt.

The group scampered up the steps into the office of the only Pineville attorney who would plead for the miners. He told them he would try to find a vacant lot in which they could hold a meeting. Vorse's attention fixed on the office wall calendar with a big picture of a grinning, barely clad brunette with a black bob and black silk stockings. The attorney warned the members of Vorse's group to move away from the windows. "They've got their machine guns trained on it," he said. Some of the male writers, with bravado, looked out the window. They had the right to do so, they said. Smiling sadly, the lawyer shrugged, "You've got the right, but you want to understand whatever these people want to do, they'll do it anyway." Vorse thought her little band of crusaders seemed absurd. She reflected that they would be grotesque but for the death of Harry Simms. Murder had been committed because of them. Death made them authentic. Only the danger of their mission gave them a burnish of heroism.

The writers were escorted to the gloomy lobby of the old-fashioned hotel. There Waldo Frank spoke to a crowd of hostile men about matters of free speech and free assembly. A coal operator walked up to Cowley and said, "I admire your nerve in coming here where you don't know anything about conditions or the feeling of the people. If you don't watch out, you'll find out how ugly we can be." Nodding toward Vorse who was scribbling notes, the coal operator added: "and I don't care if your stenographer takes that down." Frank warned the assembled citizens in the hotel lobby that his group would publish "from New York to California" what they saw. "As far as I'm concerned," the mayor replied, "I think the citizens should run ye out of town." The ritual of insolent courtesy was cracking on both sides. At this point, the confrontation degenerated into a defense of manhood, when Wilson, Frank, and Cowley all insisted that they had registered for the draft during the war. Vorse's alienation from her comrades reached a new height.24

At last, they were allowed to drive outside the city limits where the food was to be distributed from the trucks. Vorse stayed in the car with a local woman while the food was handed out. It was getting dark. Later she learned that the last two hundred pounds of salt pork were stolen at gunpoint by one of the sheriff's men. A young miner who tried to make a speech was chased away by a deputy waving two drawn guns.

Back at their hotel, the assembled committee met in the empty lobby, sitting on dark red, thronelike chairs. They first pulled down the shades
on the street side. Much to the surprise of everyone but Vorse, they found their luggage had been searched. Gathering evidence for a charge of criminal syndicalism, the deputies had found a pair of Frank’s shoes wrapped in an old copy of the Daily Worker.

Within an hour, men came to their rooms and arrested all of them. Elsa Mitchell, Wilson wrote, “looked a little taken aback for the first time —her hat on a little bit crooked.” Followed by a crowd of about seventy-five men, they were marched three blocks to the courthouse, taken to a crowded basement court, and charged with disorderly conduct. A deputy sheriff accidentally dropped his gun. It clattered across the bare courtroom floor, creating a deep silence. A local white townswoman in the courtroom audience complained loudly because a window had been opened in her face by the black observers standing in the alley outside the building. The county attorney asked the judge to drop the charges and he quickly agreed. Back now once more across the square to the hotel, Taub, uneasy when he saw a crowd of men outside, asked for protection. His appeal was ignored.

A Kentucky newspaperwoman who had been in the courtroom grabbed Vorse outside the hotel and made her sit down in one of the chairs on the narrow hotel veranda. The reporter was “much excited and all quivery.” She told Vorse that the male invaders were to be taken for a ride, but that since Kentucky men were gentlemen, Vorse and the other two women in the party would be allowed to escape in taxis. Vorse refused to leave her group.

Two by two, the writers were placed in cars waiting in a long line outside the hotel. Each car carried three deputies, heavily armed. Vorse and Dr. Mitchell were taken out through the front door, the men out the back. The thirteen cars gunned their motors, moved slowly, then rapidly, down the highway out of town. After about thirty miles, the motorcade stopped at the Cumberland Gap, a paved semicircle where three states meet. Here the committee members were told to stand in front of the headlights while their luggage and purses were searched again, this time for any film.

In the light, Vorse saw Waldo Frank and Allan Taub, the two Jewish members of the committee. The back of Frank’s head and Taub’s face were covered with blood. They had been removed from their car and beaten with car jacks or pistol butts. The next day the Pineville newspaper reported that Frank and Taub had quarreled, fought, and injured each other. The driver of Vorse’s car, before he drove off, told her through the car window, “Never come across that border again, sister, or worse will happen.”

The writers’ group stumbled about a mile down the dark road to the
town of Cumberland Gap, where the operator of the small hotel had been
told to expect them. Vastly excited, babbling and angry, now that the fear
was gone, the writers felt a new and brave solidarity. Some even talked
of returning to Kentucky. Vorse, feeling immensely relieved and terribly
fatigued, was in bad temper. Such an idea was foolish beyond measure,
she told them. They were lucky to be alive, she said angrily. Chastened,
the committee hired cars and drove to Knoxville.

Although the NMU strike was dead, the efforts of the two writers' committees generated considerable publicity and prepared the way for the
United Mine Workers' return to Harlan. With the aid of the New Deal
government, the miners were organized successfully between 1937 and
1939. In time, Vorse knew her decision to go to Kentucky was right and
profitable. As Theodore Draper observed, it was the Communists and their
front groups who won the initial publicity that helped to end the rule of
the gun thugs: "In a few months, the Communists made up for years of
neglect. Thanks largely to them, Harlan County became a byword for
industrial oppression."25

Only two days after Vorse returned from Kentucky to New York, she
accidentally encountered Robert Minor on the street. They greeted each
other like warm friends. She walked with him to the Communist Party
office. Her visit with Minor gave her "a feeling of going from a world
of light into an obscure cellar," she wrote that night in her diary. "There
was such a divorcement from reality [in her talk with the party officials],
such an inability to communicate with them, that one felt as though they
stood back to back with the coal operators. Each looking different ways but
close together with closed minds. I went away feeling very sad. I met . . .
[William] Foster coming out. Foster, having more than ever the innocent
blank look of an Irish Roman Catholic."26 Her ambivalence about her
work with the Communists remained unsettled. But whatever the nature
of the romantic obsession that had once held her to Robert Minor, it had
clearly dissolved.

In the summer of 1932, Vorse's work was rewarded by an invitation to
spend the summer as a guest at Yaddo, an artists' and writers' colony on
a large estate two miles east of Saratoga Springs, New York. A working
retreat for writers, composers, and painters, Yaddo offered free room and
board to its residents, who usually numbered about twenty, and assured
them privacy in a beautiful wooded setting. Elizabeth Ames, the auto-
ocratic director, enforced Yaddo’s few rules with an iron will. No resident could visit with another between breakfast and 4:00 p.m.—after then, only by invitation. Everyone was expected to attend the evening meal in the turreted dining room of the fifty-five-room Victorian mansion. Director Ames was apt to send a reprove note to those of her charges who began love affairs while at Yaddo. She also disapproved of their frequent evening trips to the sleazy night spots on Saratoga’s Congress Avenue.

During Vorse’s six-week stay at Yaddo she made notes for her autobiography and wrote several money-making lollipops. Working without interruption—temporarily free of financial worry—brought ecstatic release. She spent many days alone, strolling through the blue spruce woods and marble-statued rose gardens, or sitting quietly on the banks of one of Yaddo’s four small lakes. During this healing time, she turned inward and sometimes felt guilty that she was not more social. As her son Heaton perceptively remarked in 1984, “Yaddo was the complete enclosure she had always dreamed about.”

At Yaddo she was closest to the writers Josephine Herbst and George Milburn. The three of them, Vorse said, were “on the rowdy side” in comparison with the other residents. The writer John Cheever told his daughter “about the fun they used to have at Yaddo when he was young, and about the night he and Jo Herbst got drunk and dragged Mary Heaton Vorse down the guest staircase in one of Katrina Trask’s ornamental troikas with Mary shouting ‘Hooves of Fire!’” The Yaddo group that summer included Max Lerner and Sidney Hook. “A good crowd,” Vorse wrote. “These people are more serious . . . maybe more solemn is better, than my group of [Edmund] Wilson, [Theodore] Dreiser, Charles [Walker], Waldo [Frank] and Dos Passos. My crowd is finer,” she decided.

Vorse and Josephine Herbst became instant, and as it turned out, lifelong, friends when they met at Yaddo. But Herbst, passionately consumed in her first love affair with a woman, the artist Marion Greenwood, could think of little else during that summer of 1932. Vorse—a generation older than Herbst, and two generations removed from Greenwood—was drawn into the erotic drama played by her new friends. For some ten years now, she had forgone sexual pleasure. She apparently maintained that choice at Yaddo, despite the steamy atmosphere of the retreat, so suspended outside time and group norms, so tolerant of experiment and difference. Jo Herbst remembered the Yaddo magic of “the summer before the presidential election that we believed might decide the temporal fate of us all. . . . The setting was positively high theater of the Victorian order. . . . [We were]
like citizens who have escaped from a bombardment to the safety of an underground cellar.”

While at Yaddo, Vorse resolved to seek a quiet haven in which to write, if only she could find the necessary funds. Vorse assumed that it was she, and not her children, who should leave the Provincetown house. Looking through her diary notes from 1928 to 1931, Vorse learned that they revolved “around the same themes with punctual monotony. The pattern of my life is a revolt against the children’s disturbances.” She added: “As I look back on my life, what gleans out is that I am never quite good enough. Never quite ample enough. The long uneven fight from which I have distilled certain convictions. It is impossible for a woman to be breadwinner and mother both. There are women of immense and enormous vitality who have managed homes and careers, but I do not know any who have managed well. . . . Most writing women who have done both have able husbands to help them. It is a heartbreaking business. The house will not be run well. The children will not be adequately mothered.” Vorse added: “When I think of Lydia [Gibson, wife of Robert Minor] it is having a man to whom it was possible to dedicate all of herself—and no children.”

Vorse could not escape her self-laid trap. Temperamentally unable to confront directly the cause of her discontent, much less solve it, she hid the extent of her angry feelings toward her children, exploded into tears and shrieks when the pressure grew too strong, and then quickly retreated into another guilty round of motherly service to their needs. So dependent was she on their affection, so cut off from other intimate adult relationships, that she could not risk even momentary rejection. Her self-immolation and definition of herself as a “failed mother” assured her continued connection to love, even though she railed against its dictates. She could not live happily with them, yet, in truth, she did not want them ever to leave her.

By the fall of 1932, Vorse had a larger problem. As the national economy crumbled, her money finally disappeared altogether. Somehow she brought the family through from one month to another, surviving on fifty-dollar loans from Edmund Wilson, Waldo Frank, or Neith Boyce, and selling a lollypop now and then. That year Vorse returned to her piece “Women’s Lives,” which she had begun in 1915, returned to in 1921, and dropped after her trip to Russia in 1922. She had read a great deal of Virginia Woolf at Yaddo. Vorse envisioned “Women’s Lives” as “about what men don’t know and women don’t write about. I have the feeling this should come only when I’ve made a success” she added. She set the manuscript of “Women’s Lives” aside once again, without explanation.
In early September 1932, Vorse won an assignment from Harper's to report the launching in Iowa of one of the most militant agrarian protests in American history—the Farmers' Holiday Movement. Two years after the Wall Street crash, hundreds of thousands of small farmers faced foreclosure and forced sale of their holdings. Suddenly, in August, over fifteen hundred striking farmers had assembled to guard all the roads into Sioux City, Iowa, virtually halting all milk and livestock delivery into the city. The uprising spread into South Dakota and Nebraska, as deputies confronted farmers armed with clubs and rocks.

Vorse traveled to the Midwest with her new friend Jo Herbst, who came to report the farmers’ revolt for Scribner’s, and with John Herrmann, Herbst’s husband. Vorse and Herbst visited the picketing farmers on the road north of Sioux City, squatting on pieces of wood around the bonfire near the blockaded road. The pickets carried sticks as weapons. In her Harper's article Vorse strongly supported the Communist call for immediate action to stop foreclosure. The farmers had discovered at once, she said, how their militant resistance had brought “more notice from press and legislature than all their desperate years of peaceful organization.” By December, when her article was published, redbaiting of the farmers’ movement had already begun. But the farmers saw their enemies as foreclosures and bankruptcies, not the capitalist system itself, Vorse told her readers.  

A few months after her return from the Midwest, Vorse reported a new Communist-sparked protest movement. In the depression winter of 1929–30, in city after city, the Communists had led the unemployed in hunger marches and in protests against evictions. The demonstrators demanded adequate relief and urged passage of unemployment-insurance legislation. Large demonstrations of the unemployed caused serious clashes between police and demonstrators in several major cities. National publicity of police attacks against the unemployed broke “through the generally optimistic, cheerful tone of a press which had talked of little but quick recovery and happy days,” the historian Daniel Leab wrote. For a few months the Unemployed Council movement mushroomed, at a time when millions of Americans lacked work.

The Communists called for a National Hunger March that was to start from various points in the country and converge on Washington, D.C. on December 4, 1932. Vorse joined Dorothy Day to report the demonstration. Vorse represented the Federated Press and Day Commonweal, the
liberal Catholic weekly. When they arrived in D.C., they took a dollar-a-night room in a tourist home on Massachusetts Avenue and, as Day reported, ate at lunch wagons.  

The capital city prepared for the unemployed demonstration as though for war. Ten thousand nearby federal troops, all leaves canceled, stood ready to meet the “national emergency” proclaimed by the D.C. press. Seventeen-hundred police and Capitol guards patrolled the streets, power plants, bridges, and water plants. City firemen were called in to augment the police force, all issued vomit gas, tear gas, guns, and gasmasks. Salesmen peddled riot insurance to alarmed residents. All this was created by the approach of some twenty-five hundred unarmed marchers, one-third of them women.

The Washington Post reported the assemblage of police power in breathless headlines. On December 2 the front page featured a letter sent to President Herbert Hoover and the D.C. commissioners, and signed by Vorse, Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser, Malcolm Cowley, Waldo Frank, Robert Morse Lovett, and Edmund Wilson. The letter predicted countrywide waves of protest if the marchers were barred or mistreated. The writers expressed their hope that “Washington authorities have learned something of the state of mind of large masses of our population since last summer.” Earlier in 1932 the Veterans’ Bonus March had been routed from D.C. with unnecessary violence by soldiers, resulting in several casualties and widespread public indignation.

On December 4, the unemployment marchers were ushered into the city under heavy guard. In what the Washington Post described as a “master police stroke” they were hemmed into a small area on New York Avenue, blocked at both ends by police ranks five deep. Three army planes circled over the heads of the crowd. No sanitary facilities were provided them. Communist leaders circulated through the group, urging discipline and peaceful order.

Observing the scene, Vorse pondered the many demonstrations she had seen—some ending violently, some peacefully. “Demonstrations are designed to make those in power feel as uncomfortable as possible,” she wrote.

They are designed to make the well-to-do think furiously. For instance, the girls in white with their provocative banners marching in front of the White House concentrated people’s attention on the fact that women in this country lacked the vote. It made the police seem ridiculous to march off quiet women to jail. . . . It is a strong
state which understands the purpose of a demonstration and is not seized with terror when a people come to present its wrongs to its rulers; it is a weak and uncertain state which meets a demonstration with police violence... In this country we seem to feel convinced that every time people march... they are about to break out into revolution.34

Young Dorothy Day listened to Vorse’s analysis of the purpose and power of worker unity. Day’s sympathy lay with the marching dispossessed. “Is Christianity so old that it has become stale, and is Communism the brave new torch that is setting the world afire?” she asked. How wrong it was that “when Catholics begin to realize their brotherhood and betake themselves to the poor and to all races, then it is that they are accused of being Communists.” Tremendously moved, Day slipped away from Vorse to visit the national shrine at the Catholic University, there to pray “with tears and with anguish, that some way would open up for me to use what talents I possessed for my fellow workers, for the poor.” Newly inspired, Day established a newspaper a few months later. She distributed for a penny apiece the first copies of the Catholic Worker, the Catholic response to the Communist Daily Worker. Thus the American Catholic Worker movement was launched, destined to be confirmed, albeit only temporarily, during the stirring days of the Second Vatican Council, and to bring Dorothy Day national renown.35

Except for a few summer months spent at home in Provincetown, Vorse had been in almost constant motion—traveling, writing, reporting—for the past three years. She was able to find the money to keep her youngest son, Joel, in school in the Southwest. The hard times of the Depression years brought the two oldest children back to the Provincetown house. Heaton, whose venture as a restaurant owner had failed, returned with his new wife in 1931. Ellen came back with her second husband the next year.

Six weeks after her return from the December 1932 unemployment march in Washington, Vorse again entered the Deep South, this time to report the Scottsboro Boys’ second trial in Alabama. Two years earlier a fight had broken out between two groups of young male hobos riding a freight train between Chattanooga and Memphis. Several white boys were pushed from the slowly moving cars by the group of black adolescents. The ousted white youths complained to a stationmaster. A few miles down the line, the train was stopped by a white force of armed locals who took nine black boys off the cars and to the nearest jail in Scottsboro, Ala-
bama. The oldest of the Scottsboro Boys, as they were forever known, was twenty. Two were thirteen. Two miserably poor white girls, Victoria Price and Ruby Bates—part-time prostitutes—were also taken off the train. The terrified black boys learned the next day that the girls claimed that they had been raped aboard the train by the jailed black youngsters. Neither of the two physicians who examined the girls immediately after the alleged attack found any evidence of motile semen or any other physical sign to support the girls’ rape story. But within fifteen days, with no reliable evidence presented by the prosecution, one thirteen-year-old black boy was sentenced to life imprisonment and the rest to death. The first national protest at this legal farce came from the Communist Party and its front groups who organized a militant campaign that brought thousands of dollars and petitions in support of the Scottsboro Boys from all over the world. In November 1932, the Supreme Court of the United States reversed the lower-court verdict on the grounds of inadequate counsel.\(^3^6\)

At the second trial Vorse was one of two women present in the crammed courtroom made stifling by the constant cigarette smoking of both audience and players. In the *New Republic* Vorse unwound the core of the case in “How Scottsboro Happened.” She described the thousands of white women like Price who were born into the impoverished existence of working-class life in the southern mill towns. There virtue was rewarded with demeaning work and constant insecurity. Only the “nigger” beneath could support Price’s shaky status, could confirm her hope for better things. So it was, Vorse wrote, that when Victoria Price opened “her hard mouth . . . all the rest of the trial” became “a legal dance, a posturing . . . a huge game, a gigantic keeping up of appearances” to maintain the vital lie of the honor paid to southern white women.\(^3^7\)

In mid-April 1933, Vorse significantly shifted her public political stance. Accepting assignments to report events in Europe for the *New Republic* and *McCall’s*, she also represented the newly established journal *Common Sense*, founded in late 1932 by young Alfred Bingham, the radical son of a conservative senator. Vorse remained as one of the contributing editors of *Common Sense* from 1933 to 1935, serving alongside other prominent insurgents like Selden Rodman, John Dewey, John Dos Passos, George Soule, and Stuart Chase. Despite their real political differences, all these united in their rejection of Soviet-style communism, and urged instead the value of a democratic socialist society. Vorse’s decision to ally herself
with Common Sense marked a public statement toward which she had long been building. In 1933, Common Sense served as a center for anti-Stalinist independent radicalism in the United States.38

Three months before Vorse reached Berlin, Hitler had been appointed chancellor. He moved at once to crush dissent. An emergency decree banned all public meetings and anti-Nazi publications. The Prussian civil service was purged and nazified. Storm troopers roared through the streets, rounding up victims. By early March, 100,000 enemies of the regime had been arrested. Many hundreds disappeared or were killed. So quickly did Germany become a police state that by May 1, the German trade unionists who took part in the traditional Labor Day parade marched under the sign of the swastika.

The four weeks she spent in Berlin coincided with this peak of nazification, giving her a uniquely well placed seat from which to view Hitler's final assumption of power and to study the base of Nazi support. In addition to her facility in German, Vorse was blessed as an investigative journalist for another reason. Exploiting her connection to several wealthy German families who were distant relatives or long-ago friends of her parents, she found herself being squired about by S.S. leaders eager to give her guided tours of the new Germany. Vorse even won an invitation to attend one of Joseph Goebbels's tea parties; this scoop elicited the massive envy of several experienced American reporters in Berlin. She was also making good use of her contacts with the European left, all the time sharing and piecing together with American and European reporters the hidden story behind the German "revolution." Rapid movement left her physically exhausted and intellectually overwhelmed. It seemed to her that she had never faced before such a difficult job of analysis and writing: "I don't think another country ever voted itself out of voting. . . . I have so many impressions that my head bulges, my head bursts."

Shortly after her arrival in Berlin, Vorse decided that support for the Nazis came from a middle-class youth movement, as well as from a large segment of the German proletariat. Her interpretation ran directly counter to the Communist claim that fascism was a capitalist plot to maintain the power of big business in Germany. Vorse's judgment of the nature of Nazi support generally agreed with that of Alfred Bingham and Common Sense. Unlike Bingham, however, Vorse saw as early as 1933 that Hitler's rise to power would lead to war.

In the spring of 1933, Hitler issued orders that barred Jews from most employment and proclaimed a national boycott of Jewish shops. Vorse at
once recognized that “the foundation stone . . . of the Nazis is that of Race and Blood.” Eager to tell the story, she claimed to be the first gentile to visit the Jewish Help Verein in Berlin. Hundreds of Jews from all over Germany came here to get help in leaving the country. Vorse tried to comfort a young Jewish woman who was leaving for Denmark. The woman could not stop weeping, for she was forced to leave her children behind until she could earn enough money to send for them. “The Nazi usually is as surprised by the concern and indignation expressed abroad over the persecution of the Jews as one might be at having a neighbor bring in the S.P.C.A. because one was fumigating vermin,” Vorse wrote. Americans should understand this, she mused in her diary later that evening, for “we employ only in a much more thorough way the same method against the Negro.” At this point, she did not anticipate the wholesale slaughter of Jews that was to follow her stay in Germany. Her day spent at the Help Verein led her to recall in her diary a conversation she had heard in Gastonia while she was waiting for a streetcar. She remembered: “A nice looking boy drewled to another without animus, as one might talk of opposum hunting”:

“Did yer ever hurt a niggah?”
“No, I never hurt a niggah.”
“I’d kinda like to hurt a niggah.”
“Yeah, I’d like to hurt a niggah.”

In May 1933, book burning began in Germany. Not only the works of Marxist and modern authors, but also those of some German writers, were tossed into the flames. Just before she left Germany, Vorse observed her first book burning as she stood in the square of Kaiser Franz Joseph. There was none of the pageantry and speech making that usually accompanied this Nazi ritual. The silent passersby looked uninterested; only a few paused to watch. Young boys in Nazi youth-group uniforms stood in a long line near huge trucks filled with literature and unenthusiastically passed the books from hand to hand into the flames. The teenager at the end of the line called off the authors’ names in a bored tone as he threw the books on the fire. Vorse heard the names of John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis. For Vorse, the drama of the scene lay in the swirling book leaves, caught by the spring wind, pushed by the draft of heat up from the flames. The pages danced by the hundreds in wide circles high above the square, pirouetting against the night sky, rolling and dipping above the buildings. “Bright as fire they mounted upwards, farther and farther they soared high above the blaze.” She fancied that the surviv-
ing pages held the distant promise that "they could be torn and banished but never destroyed." Recounting the scene in the New Republic, Vorse recalled a photograph she had been shown of an "old Jew with a beautiful, benevolent face" being dragged through the streets in a small cart by a German crowd. The old man had sat "calm and unmoved, filled with a sweet dignity as triumphant as that of the high-soaring, invulnerable book pages which fire could not burn." 40

Vorse made a sudden decision to visit the USSR before her return home. The generous royalties from the Soviet publication of Strike! had created a stock of rubles reserved by the Soviet government for her use, in effect making her the guest of the state during her stay. The three weeks Vorse spent in Moscow were full with planned activities. Soviet authorities, in carefully arranged tours, showed the best they had to foreigners in the early thirties. By flattering foreign authors, who often were not accustomed to such recognition in their own countries, the Soviets indirectly promoted the regime, just as providing guests with superior accommodations netted returns. Vorse was whisked by earnest Intourist girl guides to visit model factories, schoolrooms, department stores, people's courts, and the Park of Rest and Culture. She marveled at the number of steamboats, factories, and streets named after John Reed.

Vorse saw that impressive industrial progress was being achieved in the USSR. Her critical attitude toward Soviet censorship and restriction of movement was tempered by her knowledge of the heavy-handed repression of labor organizers and activist radicals in many communities in the United States. In the report of her Soviet visit published in McCall's, which brought her a hefty nine-hundred dollars, she emphasized the contradictions of Soviet society, which made her feel "alternately attracted and repelled." 41

Vorse learned most about the way Soviet socialism worked during the evenings she spent with the ex-newspaperman Spencer Williams, director of the American-Russian Chamber of Commerce, and especially from her frequent meetings with the American journalists assigned to Moscow—William Chamberlin and Eugene Lyons. Both men had gone to the USSR as ardent supporters of the regime. By the summer of 1933 they had become disenchanted, angry cynics. They confirmed all she had heard about forced labor camps and Soviet attempts to hide from newsman the effects of the Russian famine of 1932-33. Foreign journalists would lose their visas, they assured her, if they filed reports critical of the Soviet government. The newsman attempted to win her an interview with Stalin,
never obtained. Vorse planned to ask Stalin why the Communist Party allowed classes to exist with cultural and material privileges higher than those of the workers. When leaving the Soviet Union, she entered a cryptic note in her journal: “I came here to learn the truth, and I have learned it.” 42