

BUILDING, BUILDING, BUILDING

By RUTH FIRST

THE day I left Moscow all newspapers carried reports of the first atomic-energy power plant opened in the Soviet Union and this was the main topic of conversation everywhere: in the metro, in the buses, in hotel lifts and dining rooms, in the plane in which I flew to China, and here, too, in Peking. Everyone was elated. For while in the Soviet Union all are appalled at the thought of using atomic science for devastating atom and hydrogen bombs ("It is equivalent to thinking of the power of electricity in terms of the electric chair," was the way one Soviet scientist put it) all understand the tremendous benefits the Soviet citizen will reap in his everyday life if atomic power is harnessed by man to production and for creative purposes.

This atomic energy plant just opened is a small experimental one with an output of only 5,000 kilowatts, but already work has started on a second plant that will have an output of 100,000 kilowatts.

So life strides on in the Soviet Union, as though by Seven-League Boots.

Graphs of industrial production soar as do the temperature of patients in high fever, but ever higher, with no crises of overproduction and unemployment to bring them hurtling down again. In this country there is no limit to man's endeavour.

First illiteracy is wiped out, then seven years' education is made compulsory for all, now 10 years' schooling for every single soul in town and country, far east and far north. In a Republic like Armenia which 34 years ago had not a single secondary school, one in every four persons is now enrolled either at a school, university or technical institute.

Statistics again? Yes, in the Soviet Union one must learn them everywhere.

Seven sharp falls in the cost of living since the end of the war. Wages in 1953 219 per cent higher than in 1940. In the formerly backward Armenia, whose capital, Erevan, had three small factories in 1913, the per capita output of electro-energy is higher today than in France or Italy.

More statistics: 47 theatres and opera houses in Moscow, but still not enough. Queues for the ballet where less than half a century ago there were queues for bread. A new canal-dredging machine used on the Volga-Don Canal does the work of 35,000 men armed with shovels and spades. Everyone offers you statistics: so many acres of tree plantations to beautify the new Moscow and the countryside; so many square metres of housing in new 5- and 7-storey apartment buildings; so much manpower saved by the introduction of new techniques and the invention of new machines.

For the Soviet people, fired with the joy of their own creation and experiencing in their daily lives the benefits of their skill and effort, progress is rapid, but never fast enough. So progress must be measured and statistics learnt and each year, each quarter, they become outworn as the country gallops forward.

For this is a country in which change is visible to the naked eye.

Leave Moscow in May and when you return in November you may find yourself in a street completely unrecognisable, so many new buildings have gone up. In June in Moscow work was proceeding simultaneously on 200 buildings. Six-storey buildings take seven months from start to finish. How is this possible? Building techniques have been utterly transformed. On no building site in the Soviet Union have I seen lines of men endlessly trundling wheelbarrows up narrow plank gangways, tipping the loads and returning once again for a dozen spadefuls. More of the construction is done in the vast mechanised factory plant than on the building site. Roofs are laid in sections; painstaking plastering of public buildings has been eliminated and new ceramic materials in large layers are used instead. Paint spraying machines do the work of dozens of men in half the time.

At an exhibition of new construction methods I saw how great blocks of the concrete foundation, slabs the equivalent of a half-day's bricklaying by one worker, whole staircases are lowered into position by giant cranes.

So it was possible to rebuild Stalingrad, almost completely destroyed in 1942-3 in the fiercest battle of the war, in one-fifth of the time estimated by a visiting American engineer. So Leningrad has been rebuilt and Sebastopol, and new suburbs of new cities are shooting up faster than the first grass-shoots on the new lawns before the apartment buildings.

Whatever housing problems remain in Soviet towns and villages, largely a legacy of the war, will be solved thus in the next few years.

One has to get accustomed in the Soviet Union not only to the value of statistics to measure the constantly changing life of the

people, but also to the scale on which things are done in this country.

The Volga-Don Canal in the Stalingrad-Rostov area, for which 22 successive plans were submitted to the Tsars of Russia, was completed in less than four years, one ahead of schedule. (The Panama Canal took 35 years, and the Suez eleven.) Using the first walking excavators in the world, each manned by a team of 17 engineers and highly trained operators; giant bulldozers, special concrete-making plants that rushed liquid concrete to the site, there to be poured and pressed in record time, work on the canal proceeded at an unprecedented rate. The Don River had to be raised to meet the River Volga by a system of pumping stations, reservoirs and nine sluices in a river staircase. Whole villages of altogether 9000 families had to be moved from one region to give way to a reservoir. Cossack families watched their homes transplanted to new sites, and in a street named "Sea Street" before there was any water in sight, they stood by as with the opening of a great reservoir, the man-made sea was brought to their door-steps. A row of hills was in the way of the Canal, so some of the engineers of the Moscow metro were called in to construct underground tunnels.

So nature was re-made. Today cotton, rice and grapes are grown on formerly dry and barren steppes. A system of subsidiary canals will feed water to the arid lands of this vast area; giant hydro-power stations along the canal will electrify agriculture. Besides the irrigation systems, shelter belts of trees are being planted to protect the land from the hot air which parches them in the summer areas. The soil will be made fertile, and the climate will be changed as well.

And by this canal, and the other two, the one from Archangel in the north to Leningrad and the second the Moscow-Volga Canal, Moscow in the interior has now become the Port of Five Seas.

The Volga-Don Canal is not only an engineering feat. It is a work of art and a splendour to look upon. Triumphal arches are the gateways to the locks; festooned lamps light the way at night along the canal banks; the neat slopes of these banks that turn them into boulevards and the sculptures and motifs celebrate the triumph of man over nature and the advent of the era in which science, engineering and art are raising human civilisation to unprecedented heights.

Stalingrad is the most beautiful city I saw in the Soviet Union. The embankment of the riverside, not yet completed, stretches for miles along the city front and with its columned theatres and public buildings, structured arches and wide steps here is a new Athens. But here the marble halls, the statues in the parks, the drama and the dancing is not for a privileged aristocracy. Manual labour in the Soviet Union is being replaced by the machine; agriculture in some regions will shortly be totally mechanised. So already this year the Soviet Government is discussing the shortening of the working day. And in his leisure time the citizen of Stalingrad, as everywhere else in this vast country, is building a new culture in which all share equally.