

SIDELIGHTS ON RUSSIA

IN Russia the population is always mentioned in numbers by the word "Souls." A village counts so many "Souls." A man is not described according to his "heart," but according to his soul, and the soul with its needs and fluctuations is never overlooked. It is not unusual to hear of somebody who has disappeared from society that he is absent "saving his soul," a form of occupation like hunting, trading, or any other accepted as natural and seemly. The man who has suddenly gone "saving his soul" may have gone "into the desert," i.e. solitude, to bewail his transgressions for a time and return chastened, or he may never return, having made the sacrifice for ever. Anchorites are still found in Russia, happily in districts so remote that they remain undisturbed by the present chaos.

Revolutions, always hazardous, have seldom realized the immediate objective of their promoters. Sudden and violent methods are often deceptive in results. Only when an entire people moves united to claim rights of which it is well cognisant, and for which it is prepared to make heavy sacrifices, can success be assured. Now, it is undeniable that the Russian revolution was not the work of the Russian people, but of a group of intellectuals persuaded that they could mould on novel, practical, futurist lines the most conservative, and—if we except the Celt—the most spiritual race in the world. The Russian soul has resisted, and will continue to resist Lenin and his satellites who, instead of transforming or killing it, are being themselves transformed and adapted to fit the changeless Russian mentality. A simple registration of facts proves the gradual modification of the Bolshevik programme in the sense indicated. The most salient event in the history of Lenin's great

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adventure is the restoration of religion to its place in the daily life of Russia. The prohibited cult of the Orthodox creed is once more free, and is all the more efficacious in influence that it is no longer trammelled by State protection. We know how the Patriarch Tihon, elected at a critical moment by the panic-stricken bishops holding the first Church Sabor (Council) free from Government control, hurled anathema at the Dictator and rallied the people round him until Lenin averted disaster to his entire enterprise by swift restitution of the churches and authorization of Divine Worship therein. Monasteries and convents are now again tolerated, and evening prayer, sung in common by the workers in Bolshevist factories, is ignored by the Commissars whose duty prescribes the arrest of participants in "superstitious chants or practices." Most of those who had been momentarily led away by promises of a new world, a heaven here below, have come back penitent to the creed of their youth, never to stray again. Villages where church services had been abolished made solemn atonement. But the bulk of the people had not abandoned public devotions, for the average Russian cannot exist without ritual observance. For him, indeed, it is the "Mass that matters," although he has no clear idea of the true import of the Sacrifice. He will travel far to assist at it, as at some mystic tribute to the Creator without which he cannot cancel the debt he owes. He gets little or no instruction from his ignorant clergy; he cannot read, so has no use for printed Bibles; but the Liturgy is his solace and mainstay. He is familiar with it from childhood, loves it, seeks it, and places all his trust in it. Russian mujiks have been known to hunt out their lax priests and with threats of blows force them to serve at the Altar on the appointed Feast-days. God is for the mujik an indisputable Truth, an Arbiter whom he dreads,

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but he remains fascinated by the figure of Christ, more endeared and—if one may use the expression without profanity—more popular in legend and story than any national hero or martyred patriot. There is no salutary religious discipline to hinder the mixture of truth and fable in the current stories about the Sacred Person of the Redeemer. Some of these are credited as firmly as the Gospels, and they are full of poetry and the refinement of true piety. A great harvest awaits the missionaries sent from Peter's Chair to these strugglers whom Archbishop Ropp, Catholic Metropolitan of All the Russias, describes as "tormented by gross materialism and misty yearnings towards the Divine." The Russian Church, to give it the name beyond which it did not aspire, was politically powerful while it had Imperial patronage. It was never an apostolic Church, although some attempts were made to spread its belief in order to extend Russian influence. Its numbers were at times increased by Imperial Decree, as in the case of the Protestant Letts, whose temples of worship were one day summarily proclaimed to be henceforth Orthodox! At an earlier date the Uniat Catholics of Ukraine were forcibly led back to "Orthodoxy" after having given allegiance to the Pope. These poor people are actually seeking reconciliation with the True Fold now that pressure from above is removed. There is also a marked movement towards Rome among the scions of the Russian nobility expelled from their homes by the Bolsheviki and brought into contact with Catholicity at its source. Yet if one looks for spirituality in the Russian it is least discernible among the intellectuals. The famous men who have revealed some of Russia's genius to the world were for the most part either hostile or indifferent to the religion of their Church. Not even these, however, can stifle the voice of Faith at critical

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moments of their lives. A Russian without a latent sense of religion is hard to find. The greatest of their modern authors, Tchekov, a would-be free-thinker, writes to his family : " If I don't get home by Easter, when you break the fast remember me in your prayers." And again, from his country home at Melihov : " It is Easter. There is a church here, but no clergy. We collected eleven roubles and got a priest from the Davydov Monastery who began the Great Service on Friday. The church is old and chilly, with lattice windows. We sang the Easter Service, my family, my visitors, young people. The effect was good and very harmonious, particularly during the Mass. The peasants were much pleased and say they never had such a fine celebration."

From Taganrog he sends the following graphic account of a religious festival that made a break in his travels :

" Fragrant breezes through the wide-open window, and green branches thrusting themselves in. A glorious morning ! It was a holiday, May 6, and the bells were ringing in the Cathedral. People were coming out from Mass. I saw police officers, justices of the peace, military superintendents and other principalities and powers leaving the church. . . . I bought two kopecks' worth of sunflower-seeds and hired for six roubles a carriage on springs to take me to the Holy Mountains and back in two days' time. I drove out of the town through little streets literally drowned in the green of cherry, apricot, and apple trees. The birds sang unceasingly. . . . There were strings of pilgrims along the road. . . . The Holy Mountains is a beautiful and unique place. . . . The monks, very pleasant people, gave me a very unpleasant room with a pancake-like mattress. Fifteen thousand pilgrims were assembled because of St. Nikola ! The services are endless : at mid-

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night they ring for Matins, at five for early Mass, at nine for late Mass, at three for the Song of Praise, at five for Vespers, at six for the special prayers. Before every service one hears in the corridors the weeping sound of a bell and a monk runs along crying in the voice of a creditor who implores his debtor to pay him at least five kopecks for a rouble: 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us! Please come to Matins!' It is awkward to stay in one's room, so one gets up and goes out. . . . I have bought an ikon for Auntie. . . . The food is provided by the monastery for all the fifteen thousand: cabbage soup with dried fresh water fish, and porridge. Both are good and so is the dry bread. . . . The church bells are wonderful. The choir is not so good. . . . I took part in a religious procession in boats."*

This man declared he had lost his religion, but evidently the loss was not complete, for throughout his life he met with rapture any opportunity of returning to the customs and atmosphere of his childhood. Education in Russia begins with church singing, reading of the Psalms, regular attendance at Matins with obligation to assist at the altar and ring the bells. This is why Russians, wherever they congregate, can sing in unison without fault or hitch their beautiful liturgical hymns. Those of us who know the chant of the Russian evening prayer coming from workers in the field, or toilers in the cities, and recognized it again in the internment camps of Germany's prisoners, will never forget the solemn devout accents of such sincere and humble worshippers. Prayer sung in common is their one solace in poverty, hunger, and humiliation, as it is their chief pleasure in times of joy and prosperity. When the peasants, designated in Russia by the name "Krestyany" (literally:

* From *Tchekov's Letters*, translated by Constance Garnett.

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"Christians") come into their own one day, and adhere to Christianity in its only logical form, there will be a chance to evangelize the East—"Russia reaches far"—and perhaps to re-create the West. Neither agnosticism nor hedonism can be grafted on the "Krestyany," and that these will have the ultimate decision in Russia's destiny cannot be disputed. Ninety-five per cent of Russia's 150,000,000 population are "Krestyany," not in name only, as Lenin has found to his cost, and the course of events must make them gradually the dominant factor of New Russia. In the great upheaval things are taking a primitive turn. Factories are depleted and industrialism is on the decline, while agriculture is of the first importance. Famished town-dwellers are flocking back to the country, content with any employment that ensures subsistence. They are badly received, for the peasants recognize that they themselves, as producers of the first necessities of life, are the chief element in the State and that they have hitherto been exploited unfairly. "You come here seeking the food we require for our families," they say to the intruders, "you who no longer produce anything but expect us to fatten you before you swell the Red Army!" The paper money offered for food was weighed instead of being counted, and became soon so depreciated that it was refused altogether. Articles of furniture in exchange for grain were more welcome than coin, which has almost disappeared from circulation. As in the religious, so likewise have the Bolsheviks failed in the economic field. They do not hesitate to admit the fact, but maintain that the failure is temporary, and that Russia's bankruptcy is not due to their mistakes. However this may be the Red Government has not been able to abolish private property or the right of private contract. Far from establishing Communism they have given an impetus

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to private enterprise. Professor Zagorsky tells us that there was never such a lively trade movement leading to capitalism as just now in Russia when goods and property change hands incessantly under the pressure of necessity. Nobody wants to hoard the Soviet paper money, but belief in the ultimate value of ground property and objects of worth makes of every citizen a speculator in sale and purchase.

Ostensibly the Soviet State directs all commercial transactions. In reality its accredited agents are engaged in secret business as individual buyers and vendors. Russia was ever the home of illicit commercial transactions, but the tendency has become aggravated under the Communist regime. Sokolnikoff, a Bolshevik of the better type, complains that the men formerly in power have not emigrated, and still practise their nefarious arts, with the sole difference that their activities are now illegal. They have a double organization, externally Communist, internally Capitalist, and the State is powerless to prevent this. Worse, in order to stimulate workers, the State is obliged to entice them by bribes of individual bonuses, so that the principle of private property is reaffirmed and even intensified. The programme of socialization of the land was frustrated by the stubborn refusal of the peasants to part with what they had just seized from the big landowners. The capitalists of Imperial days had been forced to submit to the socialization of their manufactories, but the struggle with the peasants ended in the defeat of the Soviet Government. Confronted with the country's boycott of the towns Lenin reformed his original programme, and already in 1919 started to "protect" the small landholders, acknowledging their position, and endeavouring to introduce communist methods of work. Again he failed. The mujik will toil for himself and his household as did his forefathers; but the idea of profit in common,

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and the fear of fresh partition of the land by Government authority and not by contract with his neighbours, as in the first instance, made him recalcitrant to the projects for his benefit made by communist theorists. The mujik wants his plot of land for himself and he wants it for ever, to cultivate as he wishes and to leave to his sons. Without the certitude of stability he will not exert himself to increase his output. Lenin fared no better with the Sovkos or model farms instituted to serve as examples and encouragement. After having for a time supported shoals of functionaries they were abandoned as out of keeping with their cost and results. In the artificial communes human nature again came uppermost, and some individuals exploited the rest. The Russian has a mutuality system of his own which is second to none and has not been annihilated by Bolshevik propaganda. Before the cataclysm there were fifteen million members of various co-operative societies. The union of Zemstvos (rural organizations) alone had over two thousand relief centres at the Russian front, not one of which lacked chapel and chaplain during the campaign of 1916 ; and close on a million wounded were cared for with the sympathy and tenderness peculiar to the Russian. The indulgent charity of the mujik is perhaps born of his own marvellous capacity for suffering. Through the ages he has borne with resignation such hardship and tyranny as few other nations have experienced. His faith and hope in an Unseen Power upheld him and lent him fortitude. To-day he is accused by his masters of cupidity and selfishness. Mayhap his altruism does not extend beyond the bounds of his district now that enemies reign in the place of a great mystic figure that, being anointed, he was bound to revere.

There is no longer anything human towards which the Russian's thoughts and ideals can converge. All the more will they soar upwards, and the land where

The Man in the Street

peasant morality has the highest standard known to modern civilization, where Lenten fasts and vows of continence are most severe, where an expectant mother is sacred and given a dwelling apart until her infant is baptised, cannot succumb to the excesses of a mad gang of red fanatics. When the Russian giant, irritated beyond endurance, or tired of the slow process of assimilating these monsters, arises one day to shake them off, neither religion nor humanity will be the loser.

E. CHRISTITCH.



THE MAN IN THE STREET

DRAB-COATED, weary-faced, tired-eyed,
He goes his way along a dreary street,
From his day's toil by the grey riverside,
With aching brain and weary, leaden feet,
A struggling clerk among so many others.
. . . And yet, who knows? for in the angels' sight
—And do not angels recognize their brothers—
He freely walks in blaze of amber light :
And he is armed . . . with shield of chivalry,
With sword of silence and with silver mail,
He wears the crystal crown of courtesy . . .
And Michael, Prince of Angels, cries him Hail.

VIVIENNE DAYRELL