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Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

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RUSSIA'S HIDDEN FORCES.

BY HERMAN JACOBSON.

THE problem of the day is Russia. European civilization centers on it. If Russia goes under, all Europe—and ultimately America—must go with her.

But the world, especially America, speculates on Russia without an adequate knowledge of the forces—hidden but fundamental—which actuate the Russian.

He forgets that Russia's accumulated experiences differ from the accumulated experiences of the Western nations. She remained in primitive communities long after the Western world became organized into feudal states. She struggled for centuries under Tartar rule. She continued under an Oriental despotism long after the Magna Charta was signed. She lived under serfdom long after the institution was abolished everywhere else in Europe.

The most marked characteristic of the Russian masses is their absolute illiteracy. Until the Revolution, nine out of every ten did not know how to read or write. It was the result of a carefully cherished darkness. The sources of knowledge, such as newspapers and magazines, were practically unknown to the average Russian. His communication with the world of thought did not go farther than his voice could carry.

We are in the habit of thinking that illiteracy results in a lack of intelligence, in a lack of sense. Some day we shall be forced to revise our opinion on this subject. In my rambles round the world, I have met with a profound wisdom among those who do not know how to read and write. Instead of relying on the guidance offered by the world of books, the Russian turned on himself. He knew nothing of this theory or that theory of life and conduct. Life to him was not a continuous flux, as we consider it, whose

waves no one can ride without "keeping abreast of the time"—without keeping in touch with books and newspapers.

Because of that lack of contact with the outside world he possessed no dogmas, no articles of faith, which the average man among us, through the instrumentality of books, schools, and magazines, comes to consider sacrosanct, eternal, exalted above life itself. To him life was a labyrinth of mystic windings where a man turned one way or another. Innumerable paths without sign posts. He loved his earth with a mystic love and trusted her with a mystic faith. That is all he knew. That is all he cared to know.

Another thing: Russia knows nothing of the forces which galvanize the life of the masses in the West. She knew nothing of books; and therefore knew nothing of the Washingtons, the Lincolns, the Jeffersons every country boasts of. There were no such slogans, no such ringing phrases as characterized our Civil War or the Great War. There were few things to direct the interest of the people to external objects, such as the State. Indeed, the average Russian, from the humblest peasant to the profoundest thinkers like Tolstoi and Dostoyewski, was far from exalting the State or those enhancing its successes. As a matter of fact, both the institution and those in any way associated with it, were always distrusted. The men and women of historic prominence in Russia, such as Peter the Great or Catherine II, who are considered heroes and benefactors of their country in the Western world, were known as anti-Christis to the average Russian. He tacitly acknowledged their instrumentality in creating a vast empire, but, insisted, they ruined the people in the process. Vast empires, the average Russian was in the habit of pointing out, were of great advantage only to emperors; never to the man in the street. He always asked whether a Russian was happier than a Dane because his country was larger. On the other hand, he never tired of talking of the bitter fruits of empire building in his own country: Peter the Great, the greatest empire builder, was a monster who lived on the misery and degradation of his people. He imported armies and navies into Russia and forced the inhabitants from pursuits of peace into pursuits of slaughter. In a word, there was no universal edification of the State in Russia; which unites all other peoples in an affection for a common object. For him the State has not yet dethroned all the other forces in human life as it has done in the West.

The unifying emotions in Russia were the emotions of pity,

sympathy, mercy. The outcast, the vagabond, the tramp, the thief, the prostitute were the common objects of commiseration. No genuine Russian could find it in his heart to berate misfortune, to mock poverty, to rebuke crime. The hero in the mind of the masses, as well as of the Russian novel, has rarely been the man with a perfect crease in his trousers and a bankroll in his pocket. Never the guttersnipe who had won his way to the presidency of the municipal gas plant. Russia's heroes have always been failures, suicides, consumptives, imbeciles, prodigals—men with a sense of value completely at variance with that of Solid Prosperity. The most important moment in the story of a Russian author is not when a great effort has been crowned with success, a protracted hope realized, or estranged friends reunited. It is not on the page where the hero comes into a big fortune or the heroine has landed the man for whom she had set her cap. The author rises to his highest powers only when he pleads for the fallen woman, for the criminal, the man out of joint with his time, for the rebel hurling defiance in the teeth of the great ones of the earth. This is the great single emotion that unites Russia.

Another thing which strikes the Western mind as peculiar, as "bad" in the Russian is his attitude toward "Law and Order."

The Anglo-Saxon, who is the leader in this respect of all Western Europe, considers "Law and Order" as the ideal embodiments of all human conduct. They are the items on the Decalogue purposely omitted on the stone tablets that they might later be inscribed on Anglo-Saxon hearts.

Shocking as this will prove to the average Anglo-Saxon, it must nevertheless be stated, if an adequate idea is to be gained of the secret forces actuating the average Russian—the Russian entertains a secret distrust of the efficacy of man-made law. He is so constituted that he doubts his own wisdom in planning out life and positively distrusts the wisdom of others—especially the wisdom of hired agents. The vast majority of the Russian masses feel, though in many instances very vaguely, that parliamentary regulations and restrictions do not make men nobler, better, more tolerant. Russian men and women with power of articulation will tell you that if all the legislatures and courts were wiped off the face of the earth, the world would be a better place in which to live. They insist that not only are their much-heralded benefits negative, but that they are positive in their malevolence. At best, they arrest man's powers of self-development physically, mentally, and spirit-

ually. In a discussion on this subject I once heard a Russian declare:

“Look at music and think of the marvelous powers for self-realization and development of the human spirit when not curbed by laws and regulations. Out of a half dozen elementary notes it has built up for itself a world so entrancing that it lays a spell on all those who come under its influence. Think of what would have happened to music had legislatures and parliaments taken hold of it, checked it a bit here, a trifle there. Instead of listening to the compositions of Wagner and Kreisler performed by the orchestras of Petrograd, Vienna, and Boston, we should still be listening to the improvisations of savages beating tom-toms and calabashes. What is true of the human spirit in music is also true of it in all other of its infinite potentialities. Why, who knows,” he concluded, “how many such marvels in social organization and human intercourse man-made law has already strangled and how many more it will strangle.”

Nor has the Russian that awe of Order that the Western mind has. He delights, indeed, in what Stephen Graham calls “Divine Disorder.” When he beholds the order and arrangement of life in the West, he exclaims: “*Tolko Meshayet!*” (It’s in the way). He cannot endure a life of systematized and regulated movement. He loses heart in a course mapped out from the cradle to the grave. He cannot live without mystery and adventure.

Some time ago I found myself in a restaurant at one of the most beautiful and orderly hotels in the United States talking to a prominent Russian publicist. We were discussing this very point. He grew eloquent and swept his hand over the room:

“You see these beautiful mirrors and cut glass, the starched waiters in austere frigidity? Well, after the first flash is over this wonderful order overpowers you with a deadly ennui. It is true, it keeps you befuddled at first, but you soon begin to feel like a drunkard after a furious debauch. A fatal tedium creeps over you and you are driven to thoughts of suicide. For all this represents a life so suppressed in the attempt at system that it practically ceases to function. The men and the women who are satiated with it are the unburied dead. They move and act, but the warmth of life and the suppleness of motion are gone.”

However, the Russian is an adept at an altogether different type of order—the order that comes from within—self-discipline. He detests the discipline that comes from without, but glories in the

discipline that comes from within. He will not turn away from the most difficult task, from superhuman toils, from the most prodigious hardships, when he feels for them a prompting from within. He will devote his whole life to a single idea or ideal. He will concentrate all his emotions upon a single object. He will struggle on in the face of the impossible. He is a fanatic. For instance, Russia has produced unqualifiedly the greatest revolutionists of all time. The revolutionists of the past are children compared with them. Again, Western men and women are amazed at the toils and drills some Russian immigrants must have undergone in the acquisition of the language of their adoption, whether it be French, German, or English. Any one familiar with present day American literature will readily name half a dozen Russian immigrants with a mastery of English sometimes surpassing the best native writers. In England, the foremost prose stylist today is a Slav, Joseph Conrad, who first came into contact with the English language at an age when psychologists declare no foreign language can be mastered even for purposes far simpler than art.

The casual observer of the Russian people occasionally goes away with the idea that they are backward, unenlightened, flighty, tinged with mystery and romance. He finds them quickly discouraged, possessing no great power of will, prone to follow every turn of the weather-cock. Excepting their mysticism and romance, this is not the conclusion drawn by skilled observers. Says Professor E. A. Ross in his studies on Russia: "I have met with no competent foreign observer . . . of this people who doubts their gifts of intellect, imagination, and heart."

Again, with almost no exception, all the peoples of Western Europe and America, (since the rise of the State on the debris of the Church) are imbued with a feeling that their country is the best, their particular political system the most exalted manifestation of human ingenuity. The German has learned to shout with all the might of his soul: "Deutschland ueber alles!" The American has learned to proclaim: "America First!" Even the Mexican will tell you with all the seriousness of which only the Mexican is capable that he belongs to a raza de leones and a raza de aguilas (a race of lions and a race of eagles). The Briton will take you for a fool if you still happen to be among the benighted who have to be told that his is the best possible of all worlds. I recall at this moment a conversation with an unusually cultured English woman who had lived in America close to half a century and had been in

a dozen European countries. After telling of the marvels she had seen in many lands, she concluded: "But there is nothing quite so great and wonderful as the English government." An American lady said to me recently: "If only those poor people over there would learn to live as we Americans do. They never *would* have these dreadful troubles." And yet was she the typical American Mrs. Babbitt, spending her days in cooking and yawning.

The Russian, on the other hand, is always discontented with himself, with his government, with his mental and moral acquirements. He feels himself humble, subdued in the presence of the light and energy of the Teuton and the masterly solidity of the Anglo-Saxon. It is the other man who is always big-hearted and broad-minded. He is never quite so good, he feels, never quite so just as the other man. His broad, angular face is constantly corrugated like a choppy sea with the tragedy of existence. It is rarely that you may see in his eye a twinkle of humor. While Russia possesses a literature ranking among the greatest in the world, she possesses no Cervantes, no Mark Twain. Even the laughter of her greatest humorist, Gogol, is the laughter of a man on his death-bed. It resembles the humor of Heine in the sense that it is intended to hide a tear.

* * *

As said before, the experiences which have nurtured the hidden forces of Russia are different from those that have nurtured them in the West. The nutriment came from two sources: Her great teachers and the land.

The land problem is an old one in Russia. It dates back to the middle of the last century. In 1861 the peasants were emancipated. But the emancipation was a farce. It created a condition as bad as the one it sought to remedy. In some instances worse. In reality it was a sop to the humanitarian demands of the time. Though the economic factor must not be overlooked, either. Feudalism had been disappearing for centuries, beginning with England and moving slowly eastward. When it reached Russia it struck a snag. But enlightened Europe, especially economic Europe, would not endure such a splotch on a greater portion of its area. Hence Feudalism had to go—just as chattel slavery had to go in this country—as a result of a combination of causes.

But the peasant, who makes up almost ninety per cent of the population and who therefore gives the bent to the hidden forces of Russia, found himself terribly disappointed. He found himself

divorced from the land, forced to buy land at four times its market value. He was made to pay a redemption fee cunningly concealed in the purchase price. The whole of that sorry bargain is best appreciated when one thinks of what would have happened to the Negro had he been forced to pay a redemption fee several times the price he fetched in the slave market at the time.

With the dice loaded against the peasant, you would think that the nobleman got away with the cake. Nothing of the sort happened. He found himself as ruined as some of the Southern planters after the Civil War. In some instances worse. For the Russian peasant is not a wage worker by nature. Offer him three times as much for a day's labor off his plot as he could possibly make on it, and you will find him scratching his head, hemming, hawing, and gritting out between his teeth the information that the field must be plowed first. The field! It is his love, his divinity. The Mohammedan dreams of a Heaven where the senses are gratified to the fill. The Russian peasant thinks of it as a place where a man may have all the acres he can plow.

The only way the large landowner could get his fields tilled was to drive all sorts of unheard of bargains with the peasant. For one thing, he would not sell the peasant pasture lands, woodlands, so that he could exchange it for labor. The peasant, feeling overawed in the presence of his erstwhile lord and master, made the wildest promises, relying on his cunning to dodge them. The nobleman made extravagant demands because he knew that the peasant would not fulfill them.

The benefits of half a century from such bickering and horse-trading to the psychic life of the people was far from advantageous. They left a stain upon them which will require years to be effaced.

More, with all his sharp bargains (and occasional petty theft), the peasant rarely succeeded in keeping the wolf away from the door. Hunger always stalked in his midst. In time he also grew shiftless. A generous commission entrusted with the destinies of the peasant, willed that the land be divided equitably among all the peasants; and since the fertility of the soil was different, each peasant received a *nadiel* or share consisting of scattered strips in scattered fields. The time and energy required to go from field to field discouraged effort. Hyperbolically speaking, the peasant had to spend a day's work in going to and coming from a day's work.

Another point in this problem: From the first allotment in 1861 till the second decade of the twentieth century, Russia's

peasant population doubled. The loaf too scant for one could hardly be expected to do for two. Land taxes kept constantly aeroplaning till they reached at the beginning of the century 280 per cent of the normal rent value. The increase in population in the imperial family made further inroads on the peasant's nadiel: Since every royal member had to receive a parcel of land commensurate with his dignity.

Without text books and economist to explain away his condition, he looked at life as a serious business, made dreadfully serious by those in charge of its arrangement. He knew that there was plenty of land all around him but he could not touch it. He kept asking why, not as a dogmatist or as an idealist, but as a man who is hungry. Every village contained an oral history on how this or that parcel of land had been presented to this or that nobleman as a token of gratitude by His Majesty Somebody or Other—by a Catherine the Great for this or that night of debauch—by Czar So and So for putting down the Polish insurrections, etc.

Anyway, the theory of Mine and Thine thus sprung a leak, as Mark Twain would have put it.

* * *

The other cause is to be found in the teaching Russia imbibed from her masters. Tolstoi, Dostoyewski, Gorki and Chekhov spent a great part of their lives going among the people and, indirectly it is true, imparting their philosophy of life to them. In many instances, as in the case of Tolstoi, the exchange was mutual. For he drew his inspiration from the common people; from their unreasoning faith in life, the deep religious conviction in the ultimate goodness of existence, and the need for a readjustment to make existence more of a success.

These teachers have pointed out to her the pitfalls of Western civilization. She was shown that its glitter was essentially superficial. That it was clean-washed; but hopeless. Its bread was white. But it was adulterated. They pointed out that the primary requisite of growing life was freedom; and that that freedom was denied to the factory enslaved masses of the West. The machine, instead of the much-heralded blessing it was supposed to be, had robbed man of his joy in work, one of the greatest of all emotions—as great as the emotion a man feels for a woman. It was a terrible catastrophe—ultimately leading to a loss of faith in life itself—as great a catastrophe as depriving love of its joys, which must lead to extinction.

She was further shown that Western dilettante intellectualism only bred political cynicism, secret diplomacy, aggression, misery, death. Worse, Western civilization had a tendency to soften the backbone of the masses so that they became too indolent to grab a crowbar and uproot the old and build the new. Its most important function seemed to be to "make citizens" and mar men by teaching them to uphold a vicious arrangement of society which no one would dream of upholding without such "education." Russia's Tolstois, Dostoyewskis, Bakunins, Kropotkins, Herzens—all her great men—filled the land for half a century with strange notions about social justice, the indispensability of freedom, faith in life, distrust of politicians, and confidence in self. They showed that the efficiency slogans of the West were nothing more than the inventions of figure mongers, leather-tongued lawyers, and dry-hearted quibblers to aid in the aggrandizement of empty-headed money-changers. They showed that the Western panacea, the Three R's, was no insurance against stupidity and incompetence; that Western "higher education" only produced fops, snobs, and pretenders who thought themselves too good to work or think, and who looked down upon the man in the street as on a sort of botchy cosmic experiment in mud and water.

They pointed out that it bred a peculiar mentality extremely dangerous to a growing organism—an excessive veneration for tradition, an exaggerated love for snug comfort, a habit of appraising all things in terms of immediate profit and loss, a religious awe of money and an idolization of possession.

They pointed out that the salvation of the race lay in an altogether different direction—in co-operation, ethical justice, toleration, absolute freedom, internationalism, the elimination of the State as an agent of coercion and violence by free associations based on social need. Armies, navies, and bright breeches were all right for children on off-school days. But grown men should find something better to do.

These are some of the most important forces lying under the surface of Russia. No serious thinker can afford to ignore them.