

An Interpretation of Slavophilism

Arthur D. Rees

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THERE are good reasons for believing that the Russians are practically the greatest peace people in Christendom. They are the least commercial in the competitive sense, the least capitalistic also, and as a people, the least combative in Europe, despite the wrecks of warring dynasties that ten centuries have left upon their plains and the miscellaneous strifes and calamities of all kinds that have beset them.

Always expanding along lines of least resistance; absorbing by comparatively petty conquests, decaying or scanty peoples; reaching Kamchatka in the Far East with more ease than she reached the shores of the Baltic; never flinging her legions far and wide victoriously as did Rome, Spain, France or Great Britain Russia remains to-day, for the most part, humble, and, in reality, a conquered people, living, dreaming and preaching a morality born both of this humility and of the physical environment that has helped to foster it. All Muscovy can not be judged by those few who live in the saddle the Cossack population, men and women, numbers only about two million nor by the pitiable pageant of despotism the observer beholds in their land: pogroms, poverty, disease, distress, militarism, orthodoxy and Pan-Slavism. Russia has a soul in spite of these; a gentle and beautiful soul, only half revealed, and too much concealed by her dilapidation and her dilemma; a peaceful soul, abnormally humble and devout, and in respect to these qualities unequalled in Christendom.

Since the age of Vladimir the Holy, "The Beautiful Sun of Kief," in the tenth century, Russia has had the tradition of international peace. Vladimir wandered over the country, sword and battle ax in hand, like a reincarnation of Thor, armed with his mighty and wondrous hammer. Then came his yearning for a new religion something to inspire his life better than Perun Russia's old god of thunder and the other idols, and a little later, the picturesque investigation of his peripatetic commissioners having been completed, he became a Christian of the Greek church, was baptized with many fine and grand ceremonies, compelled his docile people to do likewise, and, like a true Northman that he was the great grandson of Rurik of the Baltic wilds he so impressed his frowsy hordes, half Scythian and half Slav, that now in the hearts of their descendants, in their popular songs and legends, in those concerning Kief especially a beautiful and pathetic strain of music eight centuries old he, Vladimir, is still the central heroic figure; once a man, but now a kind of god, sent from Heaven to rule, enlighten and bring peace to his people and be known in story and song as "Vladimir the Holy, the Beautiful Sun of Kief."

An old chronicle describes for us how his hordes drank their cup of trembling at his hands. There, around about the low hills of the southern Dnieper River, probably on the crumbling sandstone cliffs of Kief the city, studded with jewel-like legends and famed for its "golden palaces," stood his candidates for baptism; near by were priests from Constantinople, gorgeously arrayed, chanting, in strains unknown to the populace, the Greek church baptismal service. Then the democratic immersion! rich man, poor man and all, at Vladimir's command, wade into the baptismal waters, some up to their knees, some to their waists, some to their necks, and, thus finding a new faith from Heaven, they crossed themselves for the first time as the thunder rolled on high! Here is Russia remembering her Creator in the days of her youth and forgetting Him ever since; from then on, Holy Russia! Possibly Holy Vladimir, at any rate, for becoming, with that ceremony, peaceable, except for self-defence, he gave up all of his idols and his aggressive sword. The former he scourged and cast into the river, the latter he sheathed in its scabbard. And all this about 988 the first peace movement of Holy Russia. The faith of it, and its vision and dream came early in her history and have not yet gone out or been extinguished.

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Before the next such movement, time enough passed by to give the seasons and the winds and rains full opportunity to whittle down old Kief's storied sandstone hills. In 1815, the much-expanded realm of Muscovy, then a partner in the holy alliance, proclaimed under Alexander the First, the ideal of peace. This Czar declared he would rule as a father over his children and in the interest of "justice, charity and peace," and, in so doing, created the leading precedent for the peace program of Nicolas the Second.

Alexander, who in the first half of his reign ruled liberally for the days of Napoleonic supremacy, no doubt was sincere in his desire to govern in the "spirit of brotherhood," but in the latter years of his power, he fell sadly short of this standard.

Alexander the Second, the emancipator of forty-six million serfs, may have had some world peace ideal in mind when he in 1874 promoted a conference in Brussels to codify the usages of war, but the reaction from his earlier liberalism was setting in about this time and, growing worse, led to his assassination in 1881.

The next move in the direction of peace came, as the world rather well knows, through the present Czar, Nicolas the Second, who on ascending the throne in 1894, proclaimed that Russia would rule in the interests of peace and would cultivate the arts of it. In 1898 followed the first call for a World Peace Conference, and in 1899 came another circular with a similar object.

But it is out of the kind heart of Muscovy, and from the troubled, humble and penitent soul of Russia that the real peace movement of her land has arisen. For many centuries calamities have been pouring upon her plains, profusely pouring drought, famine and invasions without number; now Rurik and his Northmen to start the empire out of its prehistoric lethargy; their dynasty of conquering blood still sharing in the rulership of the land to-day; now the Tartars, remnants of whom with their high cheek bones are still visible in the Baltic provinces; particularly and always and ever poverty beyond description; poverty, disaster and conquest, like triple demons to humiliate the soul of Russia and keep her dumb for many centuries, except for the beauty of her unending song.

And out of these conditions of life has grown the peace morality that is native to the Russian people; out of their sorrows and their conquered plains, out of their broken hearts too, although the economic genesis of it all is very apparent.

The Russian people's Russia has ever been under the overlords heel, downtrodden years without number, and yet it is a land which has never produced a system of military tactics and training forever dependent for these creations upon her neighbors; a land which has produced scarcely one great naval or military commander who to-day holds a place in history as do those of other nations; a land whose people have been usually led to slaughter like sheep by Northman or Teutonic or Polish generals; whose armies have never been noted for their great campaigns, and always have been poorly drilled, managed and fed, and never yet successful in any foreign wars. Surely from such a land as this, no widespread war-morality or world-conquering legions could come.

In fact the very reverse has come to pass: the philosophy of Slavophilism has arisen in Muscovy, yet not so much arisen as it has developed with the Russian soul, not as a thing apart, but as a quality thereof, blossoming somehow with all other Russian things, out of the primitive Scythian darkness. The rebellious spirit having been crushed out of the generations since, what is left but non-resistance? Yet in these latter years a resisting spirit, nursed and suckled largely in western Europe, has falsely made it appear that all Russia was in arms, storming with chaotic unity at the church, the state and the army, deluging their ancient customs with the destructive and re-creative might of radicalism. Far and wide of the truth is this! Let no one think the vast heart of Russia has changed! Only the few have cast away the ancient quiet; only the few have the modern consciousness instead of the medieval, theocratic one; only the few are not at heart Slavophiles in feeling and in morality.

This philosophy existed long in the national or social mind before it was crystallized into public doctrines, and exists even yet largely in its more primitive unworded or instinctive form, although it was Peter the Great who

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unconsciously awoke the latent and then unexpressed Slavophilic feelings and moralities when he, like a civilizing Pied Piper, charmed the chieftains of industry of Western Europe to follow his trail into Muscovy, his "Empire of Little Villages," and there regenerate them.

Therefore at about the end of the seventeenth century in Russia, the "dumb silent centuries" gradually became articulate in expressing their opposition to all things western. This is the heart of Slavophilism, and no one can truly fathom the Russian soul before understanding its philosophy. It is the Muscovite theory of the simple life, still crying out against the Great Peter's work and recalling the devotees of western culture to its idealization of medieval, theocratic, autocratic Russia.

Despite this reaction, however, it has a great meaning, a tender beauty, and a message of depth and power for our western world. Primarily Russia is a peasant and an agricultural land, and there is a colorless monotony in her vast plains. Indeed land and people are alike; as in the average peasant there is patience, resignation and submission, so there is in the very land itself. Open and prostrate it lies beneath the torrid sun of the south, and the arctic winds of the north; subdued and downtrodden for centuries, it and its people have always been at the mercy of ruthless men and rainless winds.

Thus passive endurance has become one of the saving qualities of the Russian's soul. The peasant's nature is one that has few wants and little rebellious power. The Greek church of the simple gospel is his and a government of the Czar's will. His power of self renunciation is one which in Slavophilic thought gives him true liberty. Therefore ask the followers of this doctrine, what need is there of the constitutional liberties of the west, or its republics or limited monarchies, or its differences in ecclesiastical faith and structure? Slavophilism declares that Russia has the only true freedom, faith and brotherhood, which other lands sadly lack. In addition she has the ancient and splendid heritage of the communal land system, wherein the inherent justice of the Russian peasant's heart is shown by his voluntary division and re-division of the land among his brothers at stated times.

What need therefore, Slavophilism asks, for the degenerate justice of the west? None! Away with Europe then!—the Europe of competition and gruesome factories! The Europe of destructive forces, of greedy land grabbers, of capital and labor wars, where society is held together, not as in Russia by the ties of affection, brotherhood and communal interest, but only by money and greed, and where free thinkers, atheists and materialists abound, whose lives and thoughts would unsettle the holy, orthodox feelings of Russia, disturb her ancient conscience and poison her humility with murmurings of discontent and rebellion.

Away with the books of the west, too! And its agricultural implements! Wooden ploughs instead of chilled steel! Outdoor work and not indoor prisons called factories! Peasants working for centuries beneath the uncanopied sun, and on the floors without walls, will not let doors and brickwork thumbscrew their souls in confinement thus! Indoors awhile in winter will they labor, but spring airs shatter the moralities of the time-clock and away to the fields they rush; in the spring to sow and sing, in the summer to sing again and at the harvest time too, and then to plait the bearded stalks into wreaths and crown the maidens with sheaths of corn; the hymns for the "death of winter" and the "birth of spring," marriage songs and funeral dirges and chants of olden times well intermingled with the labor of their hands.

Herein the poetry of agricultural, peaceable Russia clashes with the prosaic efficiency of the west, the efficiency of commercial wars, strikes and class struggles which peasant Muscovy has known so little.

And again, Slavophilism, with its theory of successive civilizations, culled perhaps from the philosophy of Hegel, each civilization superior to its forerunner, comes to show us a vision: the gradual displacement of one type of society by another, but continuing what is best in the preceding until nothing except what is good remains

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and universal peace results, thus portraying the displacement of national civilizations by universal ones, from which ultimately an idealistic world policy will result, and the federation and peace of men.

Some Slavophiles saw even in Peter's work a process of progressing from nationality to universality. In his time there was the same yearning toward its peaceful ideal. The "Old Russia" party wanted Peter to renounce war and conquest. Alexis, his own murdered son, worked with this element which was very largely representative of the nation. To them, St. Petersburg, then a new and growing capital, was typical of change, unrest and falsity; Moscow was in their hearts the only capital, typical of Russia's old comfort and quiet. Many nobles antagonized Peter, but he swept them aside, imprisoning them or sending them to the gallows. Like Russia's slight resistance to Rurik and others, and to the Tartars, so was her feebleness before Peter the Great, who was himself, however, by no means an accomplished military leader, but an enlightened barbarian, dealing with a people whom writers and observers declare to be endowed with conspicuous traits of humility, scarcely found in the Christian nations of the western world.

Russian fiction represents its people in the same way. Unaggressive characters, who talk and think but do not act, fill its novels; they dream of the great age of the "Universal Idea" that shall come for all and regenerate the "rotten west," where "rationalism is the original sin"; the typical west that Slavophilism condemns—the west of the struggles between the rulers and the ruled; between Scripture and tradition and the upper and lower classes. The Slavophile idea, in theory at least, leaves no room for this. Christian love and humility and peasant communes, where rationalism, strife and rebellion are unknown, must be instituted in the west; then the "Universal Idea" of Russia will create Millennial times. This was the "Messianic hope of Slavophilism," and perhaps is yet to a great degree destined in the minds of its devotees to give the last feature to the development of the world, so that the love and feeling of the east would appease the discord of the west, diluting its discipline and its logic with true religious intuition and humility, and eventually the idealized relationship of autocracy for the Czar and self-government for the people—the old system so rudely strained by Peter the Great—would permeate the ruled and rulers of the world.

Here then is Slavophilism! And pacific Russia—the heart and soul of her, claiming this to be the true ethical and spiritual ideal for her people, and censoring her upper class, with its foreign culture, materialism, and infidelity, as being the only real traitor to this saving morality of the ancient regime.

Among the prominent advocates of this philosophy might be mentioned, first, Constantine Aksakoff, Russia's Rousseau, who in the middle of the nineteenth century, was a virtuous propagandist of the doctrine. He earnestly, even religiously, preached the return of Russia from the allurements of western Europe, unto her own theory of national salvation, declaring that "the social order of the west is on a false foundation" and that Slavophilism would offset its degeneracy, if only Russia would free herself from the false class leadership for whose origin the Great Peter stands the convicted sponsor! Thus Slavophilism, under the leadership of Aksakoff, instead of leading forward with the great liberal movement that came after the Crimean War, resulting finally in the emancipation of the serfs, would lead backward to the stagnant hours of medieval Russia. Then there were no German words to disfigure the Russian language! Then there were no German divisions of rank among the officials to strangle life by their formality. No, none of these, nor the disturbing importations of Peter; in Aksakoff's variation of the gospel, the Russians are the "beyond men" and need them not. Thus before Peter's reign all was Slavophilic!—a religion of the simple Christian gospel, a church considering itself the only true ecclesia, a government of the Czar's will, a life of passive humility; creating freedom of conscience and speech for the peasants, and freedom of activity and legislation for the rulers, unknown in modern corrupted Russia!

And thus was old peaceable-hearted Muscovy of the past centuries pictured as the metropolis of true political and individual morality.

Herzen, too, an able pamphleteer in revolutionary things, preached something similar, crying from his pulpit at home or in exile, that Russia would solve all her problems and lead the human race by the simplicity of the Slavophile ideal. His early and rabid westernism was greatly tempered on contact with the west. Disillusion and disgust overcame him. The mercantilism of the bourgeoisie there drove him into Aksakoff's fold, and he too thereafter found faith alone in the "regenerative power of Russia," and her system of the mir, the central sun of the Slavophilic state, the village commune, self-governing and self-contained. And then from that, this was to ensue: the whole world made of village communes as in Russia, perhaps even their log cabins too, and fresh mud to go with them on their walls! But this did not deter the vision of these evangelists. The commune was to be

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indefinitely extended; national and international ones were to be organized, all self-governing, and then would follow as the night the day, universal peace wherever these communes were found.

This is the Utopia Russia has given to the world to stand beside Plato's, or Sir Thomas More's or Morris's or Bellamy's. This was the dream of pacific Pan-Slavism.

Dostoevsky himself is of it, and is luminous not with a mere facet flash of its philosophy but with the whole orb of it. To him the Russians "are more than human, they are pan-human."

Count Tolstoi too must be listed with these preachers. He, making his own shoes and cutting his own and the peasants' grain, lived it, showing how he thought the world's work ought to be done. What were factories or the culture of the west to him in later years—Shakespeare or no Shakespeare? Destructive ideals of life. Competition, money and land greed, self-assertion—all things that are the antitheses of Slavophilism—he shunned; mocking the palsied heart and poisoned ideals of the west, and indeed of the "upper class" section of his own land as no other Slavophile did. And following its teaching, he journeyed through self-renunciation to freedom and communal life, after repentance for his wanderings, expiation and regeneration.

Dostoevsky, on the other hand, reached this philosophy largely by being born to it among the humble people who lived it. Melancholy-minded by nature—a sort of a Russian Dante but living in actual infernos and purgatorios, Siberia and prison cells, he came at last to worship his fellow countrymen and their ideals as almost nothing else in heaven or earth, and bowed down before them "as the only remnant left of Christian humility, destined by Providence to regenerate the world." Here is Slavophilism in a fervid extreme. "The Down-trodden and Offended," "Memoirs of a Dead House," "Crime and Punishment," "Poor People,"—these, the titles of his novels, show the predilections of his own soul. He died in the mystic frenzy of this enthusiasm.

Here then, in this philosophy and in the lives of these men, is something of the soul of Russia, beautiful in its humility, yet not so humble that it is not ambitious to embrace the world in the folding arms of its peace, its communal government and its morality. Pan-Slavism of this nature is the only kind that in truth can ever come from Russia. Pan-Slavism of the military sort, with musketry, bribery and all other diabolic black arts, miscalled government, rests on such a slim foundation that it need be but little apprehended.

It was this brotherly humble soul of Russia that greatly helped to put an end to the Russo-Japanese war: not merely failing finances and lack of transportation. The feeling of a kindly people for their own and a neighboring race caused widespread mismanagement, opposition and wholesale desertions from the army, among both the officers and the men. The Romanoff family and official Russia caused the conflict, but human Russia, humble and poor, was a great factor in its conclusion.

There is no doubt, however, that a certain number of Slavophiles are addicted to the military mania, and this form of their belief is more dangerously reactionary than its ordinary phase. Many of these belong to the bureaucratic caste. Official Russia holds aloft the eagle; human Russia the dove. Official Russia leads the anti-Jewish massacres; human Russia is very little responsible for pogroms. Ignatieff, "Father of Lies," a bureaucrat of the military Pan-Slavic breed, about 1882, began the worst persecutions against the Jews in the last generation, and possibly Pobiedonosteff, the late procurator of the Holy Synod, was the worst offender in this one. The peaceful feelings of the masses of the people, however, do not sanction these outbreaks, and Slavophilism of such a sort is not the philosophy of the Russian heart, no matter how many pogroms may be enumerated.

It is therefore to human Russia that one must look for the true feelings of the people; to their faith and deeds, to the humility of their devotions, and prostrations before their numberless shrines and ikons, to their religious ceremonies in the open fields for huge detachments of the army, to the thousands of their yearly pilgrims to Jerusalem, to their superstitions, their poverty and long-suffering, all of which attest innate passive endurance and non-resistance, and show their kind of Slavophilism, which all in all, is much more than "mere reverence for barbarism."

The war-time excitement in their cities seemed characteristic of this national soul: "Russia is the Mother of Servia" was the street cry of the marching throngs. It might be added that the word mother, "matushka," is a prevalent one in expressing their feelings. They call their greatest river the "Mother Volga." Conquering Rome said "Father Tiber" and the native warriors of this continent called the Mississippi the "Father of Waters." The difference in these appellations shows the tender quality of the Russian soul, whose ardent sympathies in July, 1914, were greatly aroused by the spectacle of a large nation attacking a small one, notwithstanding whatever may be said to justify that deed.

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Finally, however, let it be added, that the one thing that will recreate Russia in the image of the west, is capital. Once let the vast sums that have invaded Muscovy be put, not to the autocratic purpose of the official rulers, but into factories, mines, city subways and transportation of all kinds, irrigation, canals, agricultural implements and to other productive uses, then capitalistic Russia will stand forth shorn of the Slavophilic simplicities of non-resistance and humility. Labor wars, practically unknown hitherto, yet now beginning, will occur in much greater number and the peasant class, still unified, will be torn asunder by differences in wealth and interests; the middle class, now very small, will grow to large proportions, and many destructive forces will come upon the land which has hitherto mocked western Europe because of their presence there.

The many centuries of peasant unity, with its beauty of brotherhood, affection and communal interests, will come to an end under such a new regime. Already competitive forces are dissolving communism in land, and many of the old beauties of Russia are disappearing. Capitalism will bring with it much turmoil and strife, unhappiness and death, but also the dawn of brighter hours; newer and better cities, cleaner water, better food, houses and clothes, and after the stress of its first attack is over, and Russia has evolved laws and means to control and socialize the invader, it may be that the old simplicities and beauties of life will return, and a greater and holier Russia will arise, still able to teach and aid in the regeneration of the rest of the world.