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The Intelligentsia and the People in the Russian Revolution

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A TRAGEDY lurked at the bottom of Russian life, a discord fraught with dangers for the future of the nation. All through Russian history, the "plain people" never understood the man of education and culture, and he hardly ever succeeded in fathoming the "dark" sea of the masses. Both lived side by side in the same country; both bore the suffocating burden of a monstrously overgrown autocracy; yet through storm and quiet, through lean and prosperous years, they remained different camps, almost different races: the *bárin* and the *naród*, the "gentleman" and the "black people."

THE INTELLIGENTZIA DURING CZARISM

It was due to the cunning precautions and scrupulous watchfulness of a "scientific" bureaucracy that no coalition between the intelligentsia and the people was possible through generations. It was a consistent policy in Czar-ridden Russia to keep the peasants and workingmen away from education and to keep the man of knowledge away from the masses of the people. Neither side was to blame, yet here they were, separated by insurmountable barriers of ideas, conceptions, modes of living, fundamental experiences of existence.

It was the intelligentsia who made supreme efforts to approach the people or at least to imbue them with progressive ideas. It was a group of thinkers and dreamers, army officers and civilians, who on December 14, 1825, started an open army revolt in the streets of St. Petersburg in the expectation of finding support among the people. It was a host of intellectuals, young men and women of the well-to-do class, who early in the 70's of the nineteenth century undertook a crusade "into the heart of the people," ready to sacrifice all privileges of birth and education, to live with the plain man and to share with him their ideas. It was again a well-organized circle of intellectuals who late in the 70's

and early in the 80's startled Russia with terroristic attempts on high Russian dignitaries, including the Czar, in a vain hope thus to remove autocratic pressure from the shoulders of the people. When a revival of revolutionary activities began in the 90's followed by the first signs of a broad mass-movement, we find the intelligentsia everywhere—in the factories, in the shops, in the villages, in schools—organizing, educating, enlightening, paving the way for a conscious systematic revolution of the people.

THE INTELLIGENTZIA IN 1905–1906

When the long-coveted mass-movement at last convulsed the huge body of Russia in the abortive revolution of 1905–1906, it became evident that the intelligentsia had no power to control the Russian masses. The peasants in the villages burned and looted the landlords' estates—contrary to all advices and appeals of the thinking radical leaders. The workingmen in the cities started the colossal strikes of 1905, with the crowning unprecedented general strike of October, which was contrary to the expectations and beyond the regulating influence of the intellectuals who formed the various socialist factions. The sea of the people was too vast and the moments of contact with the intellectual elements far too few and brief to allow for a broad sympathetic coöperation between the *narod* and the radical man of learning. The revolution of 1905–1906 had no leaders. In Petrograd, a soviet to conduct the affairs of the revolution was created by the imperative need for leadership recognized by the masses. However, it was of brief duration and died with the death of the revolution.

THE INTELLIGENTZIA'S DEVELOPMENT

The period following 1905–1906 demonstrated the basic difference in the attitude of the intelligentsia and the people toward the revolution. The masses needed revolutionary changes to remedy elemental *economic* evils; the intelligentsia expected the revolution to create *political* freedom. The masses could endure no longer the archaic land system and arbitrary power of autocracy; the intelligentsia could live and prosper, both materially and spiritually, even under autocratic pressure. The intelligentsia could easily adapt itself to the semi-parliamentary system,

that crude European varnish on the surface of a blunt unwavering tyranny, which prevailed in Russia with the establishment of the Imperial Duma. The process of adaptation on the part of the intelligentsia to the seemingly inevitable order of things was in reality very rapid. Even before the last shot of the "punitive expeditions" reëchoed in the Russian villages, the intelligentsia was already disappointed in revolutionary ideas. Even at a time when dozens of fighters for freedom were hanged daily before dawn, the majority of the former intellectual revolutionists were turning to new gods. The intelligentsia had failed to stand by the revolution to the very end. It had failed to assume leadership in the great mass-upheaval. Now it was reappraising all social and spiritual values. At this time certain characteristics of the Russian intelligentsia appeared in sharp relief. Highly idealistic, but inclined towards doctrinarism; readily inflamed, yet easily disillusioned; full of self-sacrificing aspirations, yet lacking in vigor and endurance; hating autocracy, yet ready to "settle down" for practical work under an autocratic régime; loving "the people" with an abstract love, yet principally interested in the intelligentsia group; believing in the people, yet convinced beyond any doubt that the intelligentsia was destined to lead. And the greatest of these is the last because one of the reasons for intellectual hatred of autocracy was that the intelligentsia was barred from leading the nation.

Both the spiritual and the material aspect of the intelligentsia underwent a marked transformation after the abortive revolution. Spiritually, the intelligentsia, tired of self-denial, of self-sacrifice, of an excessive interest in political formulae, turns towards mysticism and theosophy, becomes absorbed in the problems of sex, gropes for an assertion of man's inner self away from the clatter of political events. Materially, the intelligentsia becomes hungry for external comfort and success in life. Gone are the days when it was deemed unworthy of a "decent man" to lead a "bourgeois" existence. Almost legendary appear the times when men refused to finish their university studies, eager to work in a dark village under the Zemstvo auspices for a miserable salary, or in a revolutionary organization with the prospect of imprisonment and exile. Men became more "practical" after the strain of 1905-1906.

This coincided with new opportunities offered by the industrial development in the twentieth century. Russia was rapidly introducing modern capitalism. New banks needed clerks, accountants, branch representatives; new factories needed engineers and other specialists; new stock companies needed hosts of intellectual workers. A large part of the intelligentsia, formerly leading an ephemeral existence, became absorbed in commercial and industrial establishments, became a live factor in the new economic order. This in itself had a "sobering" effect on many. The idea of a revolution gave way to the hope for peaceful evolution.

MEANWHILE WHAT OF THE PEOPLE?

Quite different seems to have been the spiritual and material aspects down below, among the huge strata of the plain people. There was little comfort for the poor peasant in the fact that measures tending to his annihilation bore the stamp of approval of the Imperial Duma. It was slight relief to the workingman to know that ministers guilty of shooting down hundreds of strikers, received a vote of confidence in the Tauric Palace. The agrarian situation became even more ruinous for the needy peasants after Stolypin's agrarian reforms of November 9, 1906. The workingmen in the cities were practically outlawed by an unscrupulous bureaucracy wreaking vengeance upon its recent enemies. There was no calm, no peace, no feeling of security, no prospect of a settled existence for the masses. At the same time, people were hungrily learning. The revolution had shattered the stronghold of censorship. Hundreds of periodicals were circulated in town and village. Books found their way to the remotest hamlets. The younger generation was going to schools which were opened everywhere. Many a Zemstvo introduced even compulsory education for all children of school age. Political and social ideas were steadily pouring into the minds of the people, putting fire to the fuel of discontent. The Imperial Duma, powerless and humble as it was in the face of autocracy, had to tolerate a left wing that used the high tribunal for nation-wide propaganda. Thus, while the intelligentsia was accepting the situation as final in its main outlines; while few believed in a near revolution, and fewer were ready to become instrumental in revo-

lutionary movements; while the revolutionary organizations were steadily losing their intellectual members and only the most stubbornly optimistic remained faithful to the old banners; the masses of the people were accumulating the fury of hatred, the lava of repressed energy, the poison of corrosive disgust, which only wait for an opportunity to burst forth. The general political strikes of 1913 and 1914 in the capital and in other industrial centers, came as a surprise to intellectual Russia. The gulf between the man of culture and the plain people was deeper than ever.

THE INTELLIGENTZIA, THE WAR AND THE PEOPLE

The war did not bridge the gulf. The intelligentsia saw in the world conflict a struggle for democratic principles; the masses saw in it a sacrifice in blood and treasure for things they did not understand. The intelligentsia had a vision of a strong powerful nation emerging from a victorious peace; the masses had the immediate experience of millions dead and wounded, of millions of households losing their best working force. The intelligentsia rallied to the support of the existing government in the conduct of the war, convinced that to win the war was of infinitely more importance than to change the form of government; the masses, even those plain men who were able to think, were unable to understand the possibility of coöperation between progressive forces and the government of the Czar. The government in its turn exerted every effort to manifest the futility of such coöperation. Inefficiency, vicious recklessness, coupled with an increase of oppression, marked the conduct of the war by the old régime administration.

The revolution of March, 1917, came not as a result of conscious efforts on the part of the thinking elements, but as a spontaneous outburst of despair on the part of the masses. Before March, 1917, the intelligentsia did not expect and did not wish a revolution. What it demanded with full vigor was a cabinet appointed by the Czar from the majority of the Imperial Duma. When the masses went out into the streets of Petrograd clamoring for bread and peace, they were not led by intelligentsia organizations. When army units, for the first time in Russian history, refused to suppress the riots by force of arms, it came as a result of war-

weariness and general dissatisfaction among the masses, and not as a result of systematic propaganda. When councils (soviets) of workingmen, soldiers and peasants were formed in every province and district of Russia to represent the plain man, it was not the execution of a clearly conceived plan, but an outburst of spontaneous activity on the part of the *narod*. From the very first days of the revolution there were two centers of power in Russia, two bodies speaking with authority—the provisional government supported by the intelligentsia, and the soviet-organization supported by the masses.

FAILURE OF THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT

The chasm between them was never spanned. The thinking of the masses was elementary and concrete. The peasants wanted the land. The provisional government, determined as it was to confiscate the land of the nobility and to introduce a radical agrarian reform, became entangled in theoretical controversies and practical difficulties. Months passed without marked progress. The provisional government was well meaning, yet it could not win the confidence of the masses who were hungry for immediate improvements. The workmen's and soldiers' soviets insisted upon a speedy convocation of the Constituent Assembly. The provisional government, hampered by subtleties of electoral systems, was losing precious time and evoking unwarranted suspicions. The provisional government deemed all internal readjustments and improvements secondary to the main issue of the time—the continuation of military activities at the front. The front loomed in the eyes of the intelligentsia as the object of the most generous national sacrifices and as a duty of the Russian revolution to civilization. Here it entered into a sharp and irremediable conflict with the masses.

The intelligentsia failed to see that war-weariness was the very cause of the revolution. It failed to realize that the yearning for peace, both at the front and in the rear, was overwhelming. It failed to hear the cry of anguish coming from exhausted millions who had never seen the glory of an ideal in the war. It overlooked the cruel fact that, with the industries of the country rapidly collapsing, with transportation deteriorating, with the entire economic fabric weakening day after day, there was hardly any

possibility of maintaining millions at the front. The intelligentsia remained isolated from the masses. It had no way of meeting the implacable realities of a situation. It had assumed leadership without that closeness to the currents of popular sentiment which guarantees success. It lacked the ability of moulding public opinion and wisely directing mass-energy into carefully drawn channels. It had not put before the masses a great luminous ideal, potent to make them forget pain and cheerfully endure privation. The intelligentsia remained what it had been for generations: idealistic, impractical, prone to take its own experiences as the measure of life, convinced of its inborn quality to be the leader of man.

THE COMING OF THE PLAIN MAN

When that leadership slipped out of the hands of the intelligentsia, its consternation was not less acute than had been its joy over the March revolution. The intelligentsia saw the man of the bottom rising, and was appalled. The man was uncouth, blunt, unwieldy. He had no manners, and in his rush to quench his material and spiritual hunger he broke all laws of politeness. He lumbered straight ahead without respect for traditions, for rank, for titles. He had a strong iron-clad idea which he proceeded immediately to put into operation. Worse than that, he mocked at the intelligentsia with its doubts and scruples. The intelligentsia saw in him the rising Beast of the Apocalypse. The intelligentsia had loved "the people"; it had loved its love for the people. When the people came, with crude energy, with passions, with cruelty and with beauty, the intelligentsia became frightened. It is now sending out clarion calls to the rest of the world to save it from the Black People, even through bloodshed and famine if need be. This is one of the most profound tragedies of the Russian revolution.

History avenges itself. Russia is paying for the sins of autocracy. The revolution was deprived of the knowledge and technical skill accumulated within the intelligentsia. The intelligentsia was deprived of an opportunity for inspiring constructive work. Can the historic gulf be bridged? And if so, how soon? On the answers to these questions depends much in the future of free Russia.