The Problem of Mutual Understanding With Russia

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By Harold A. Innis

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Russia has shared in the heritage of the West, but has been dominated by the Greek or Eastern rather than the Latin or Western branch of Mediterranean civilization. The Roman Empire continued in the East until the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Byzantine civilization conserved the literature of Greece and with the fall of Constantinople turned it over to the West with consequences which began and continued after the Renaissance. In the West, with the invasion of the barbarians and the fall of the political power of Rome, the Church developed its monarchical system under the influence of Roman law. In the East, political power remained in the hands of monarchies, and spiritual power based on Greek philosophical thought was in the hands of the councils. Thus political power was monarchical and spiritual power democratic in the East, while political power was democratic and spiritual power monarchical in the West. The monarchical organization of the spiritual power in the West has checked the growth of totalitarianism, but the democratic organization of the spiritual power in the East has left it exposed to the tyranny of the state. But the character of absolute power (about which Lord Acton spoke) in the spiritual world of the West contributed to the splintering of sects within Protestantism and to the strengthening of the power of the temporal world in the modern state. The power of the democratic type of spiritual organization, in spite of the encroachment of the temporal power in the East, is seen in the tenacity with which Eastern peoples have held to the Greek Orthodox Church in the face of centuries of persecution.[1]

It was in the West that the monarchical organization of the spiritual power insisted on celibacy of the clergy and on the use of the Latin Vulgate. Indeed, opposition[2] to the translation of the scriptures from Latin to the vernacular resulted partly from the attempt to check the influence of scriptures translated into the vernacular—Slavic and Bulgarian—in the Eastern Church. The break between the East and the West became more and more pronounced.

The significance of Greek civilization to both East and West provides an approach to modern problems. Both groups, in the word of Jaeger, are Hellenocentric. Jaeger puts it thus:

> The world-wide historical importance of the Greeks as educators was derived from their new awareness of the position of the individual in the community. And in fact there could be no sharper contrast than that between the modern man's keen sense of his own individuality and the self-abnegation of the pre-Hellenistic Orient, made manifest in the sombre majesty of Egypt's Pyramids and the royal tombs and monuments of the East. As against the Oriental exaltation of one God-king far above all natural proportions (which expresses a metaphysical view of life totally foreign to us) and the Oriental suppression of the great mass of the people (which is a corollary of that quasi-religious exaltation of the monarch), the beginning of Greek history appears to be the beginning of a new conception of the value of the individual.[3] "Other nations made gods, kings, spirits; the Greeks alone made men."

Whitehead has written that the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists in a series of footnotes to Plato.[4] The influence of Plato through Augustine has dominated religious and political history in Western Europe. Augustine elaborated the position of the individual and the necessity of the integration of personality. He attacked classicism as guilty of secular pride, the original sin. The doctrine of original sin and the need of grace became a powerful weapon against attempts to build up the divine right of emperors, and proved no less devastating against the ecclesiasticism of the spiritual power. Wycliffe returned to it when he saw the papacy in Babylonian captivity at Avignon, and from him the Reformation spread through Huss, Luther and Calvin. Protestantism had its roots in Platonism and St. Augustine.[5] The implications of the Reformation were evident in the unhappy alliance of Church and State in Lutheranism, the basis of democratic developments in Calvinism,[6] and the problems of countries that remained Catholic. While revolutions accompanied constitutional change in Protestant countries they never assumed the violence which characterized Catholic countries, notably in France. The sharpness of the doctrine of original sin was not adequate to secure constitutional change in Roman Catholic countries and resort was had in France to the deism, if not atheism, of the eighteenth century. Greek

philosophy provided the powerful dynamic which broke down political hierarchies and protected western civilization against the inefficiencies of absolutism and bureaucracy, either through revolution or constitutional change. Resistance was strong in Roman Catholic countries, but stronger in Lutheran Germany. The revolutionary tradition which swept the nations of the western world failed in Germany. The philosophic weapons of individualism were met by the rise of Prussia and of the bureaucratic movement in Germany. Marx developed new weapons in the class struggle and the dictatorship of the proletariat, but again without appreciable influence.

In the East the Byzantine tradition, weakened after the fall of Constantinople, emerged in Russia. The Greek Orthodox Church, with its reliance on councils, was exposed to the domination of the monarchy and became part of the elaborate structure of absolutism. Here the weapons of Marx were sharpened and improved in the hands of Lenin and others, atheism was fostered, and the structure collapsed. The political and ecclesiastical hierarchy of Russia, a vast area with a large illiterate population, without the disciplinary effects of a public opinion based on printing and of the traditions of Roman law, was unable to withstand the new weapons. In turn the fall of Germany followed. Byzantine civilization had nursed Greek culture and turned it over to the West with the fall of Constantinople. After the impact had been made on the West, it returned to the East to bring about the destruction of the inheritors of the Byzantine tradition. At long last Greek philosophy had worked its will on the West. The transfer of Greek philosophy to the West had brought the Renaissance and the modern world. Will its return to the East bring a second Renaissance? The pendulum swung from the absolutism of Russia to the democracies of the West and from the authoritarianism of the West to the revolution in Russia.

A revolutionary tradition, such as has prevailed in the history of the West, involves not only the development of the technique of constitutional change, but also the loss of valuable elements in the community. A revolution burns off the intellectual resources of communities and imposes enormous strains on the reserves of a people.[7] It is significant that Germany became the home of scholars in the nineteenth century. The demands of political compromise in the countries with a revolutionary tradition made for continuous exhaustion.

Our first duty is to conserve and strengthen our heavily depleted intellectual and spiritual resources and our universities have a heavy

responsibility in these respects. At last the Platonic problem of the state, in contrast with that of the individual, must be solved, or rather, the problem which Plato left unsolved must be met. Attempts to solve it during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Platonic fashion have been all but fatal to western civilization. We have been told often that the Industrial Revolution has at last solved the problem of scarcity, but full employment in a world of famine, full employment without butter, is upon us.

Machine industry has never shown any particular regard for the individual; in fact, it has catered to many of our worst vices and has produced luxuries that prove all too expensive. One of its first advances in the West was in the field of knowledge. The printing industry made available the vast treasures of Greece and hastened the Renaissance, but quickly pushed on to less happy results and divided the modern West along the lines of the vernacular languages. Latin soon ceased to serve as a language of unity in Europe and it became increasingly difficult to maintain a common intellectual life. Each nation developed its own narrow outlook and the possibilities of breaking through the ever-rising and ever-broadening walls disappeared. The few remaining channels of intercommunication were poisoned and division reached its inevitable end.

The problem is acute, as will appear from a study of national views concerning other nations. Only stories of major disasters other than war can be expected to cross language-borders without serious change. Stories of war are perhaps the least trustworthy of all. The spearhead of the newspaper is the headline, but a carefully worked-out position taking into account the innumerable ramifications of any action is impossible if we rely on the headlines, and it is difficult even in editorials. The editorial is influenced by the news. The Anglo-Saxon press was restricted during the war in its comments on the allies or on foreign countries and was deliberately propagandist in its efforts to emphasize allied strength. Dependence on the headline and limitations of the press inevitably make for superficial information and an unstable public opinion which can be dominated by political leaders. We are a long way from Plato's ideal of government by those who dislike to govern.

As the latest country to come under the revolution, Russia adopted an intensive propaganda in order to check a possible counter-revolution. Its effectiveness was shown in Russian survival after two civil wars and the First World War. Not only was there press propaganda, but the erection of new shrines, such as Lenin's tomb; the use of such names as Stalin (steel) by leaders; and the supervision of literature, stage and ballet. Censorship

controls the admittance of foreign correspondents and the material they send out. The effectiveness of Russian propaganda at home explains its ineffectiveness abroad. This does not refer to the efforts of the Communist party in various countries, which, on the whole, have been almost a complete failure, but to the unfortunate impression created by the mere existence of such rigid censorship. News from Russia is distrusted and foreign correspondents returning from Russia are also distrusted, whether they report strongly in favour of Russia or strongly against. The problem becomes acute with the high state of sales resistance in countries served by newspapers paid for by advertisers. In Russia government domination of the press and the limited retail development which accompanies limited advertising imply unity and effective domestic propaganda, whereas in Anglo-Saxon countries extensive advertising implies unwillingness to believe anything that does not get into the headlines, and not much of that, including Russian news. It is difficult to estimate the effectiveness of propaganda. The free discussion of the irrepressible Russians suggests that propaganda has been as completely successful in Russia as it has in Anglo-Saxon countries. Russia may have an advantage in point of unpredictability, though that is not an asset in the long run.[8] But underneath is a feeling of confidence, even if expressed in such negative fashion as by a friend of the late Samuel Harper: "The trouble is you never can be sure that these Russians will let you down."[9]

The necessity of cutting away the underbrush and of enabling us to see each other is now imperative. Whether the United Nations will serve as a common clearing-house for disputes and whether discussion will be effective in influencing public opinion remains an important problem, but we must not underestimate the long and experienced training of leaders in democratic countries in dominating news, nor the effectiveness with which political leaders in Russia dominate it. Internal problems in both regions will be reflected in hostile attacks on each other's foreign policy. Smouldering coals of prejudice will be carefully damped down to be blown into a hot, hostile fire when domestic political difficulties become acute.

"All higher civilization springs from the differentiation of social classes", but the problem of recruiting new sources of power and energy is peculiar neither to Russia nor to Anglo-Saxon countries. The latter can hardly claim to have solved the problem of keeping the ladders always open from bottom to top. Fortunately in both regions the revolutionary tradition admits of a more rapid shift in personnel, though less so than many would suggest. Whether the United Nations will make for greater or less flexibility

remains to be seen. The future involves great difficulties if we are to become well informed about each other's problems. The channels are few and muddy. Science, often regarded as the great open highway of understanding, has possibilities, but it presents a bog of language difficulties and a profusion of literature. It has been said that the smallest research problem in medicine involves a literature of probably a thousand items. Moreover, science has become intensely concerned with military secrets. The universities must attack this problem of mutual understanding. To quote from a letter of Turgot: "He who does not forget that there are political states separated from one another and diversely constituted, will never treat well of any question of political economy."[10]

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[1] Rebecca West: *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*.

[2] Margaret Danesly: *The Lollard Bible and other Medieval Biblical Versions*, p. 23.

[3] Werner Jaeger: *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, 1939.

[4] See A. O. Lovejoy: *The Great Chain of Beings: a Study of the History of an Idea*.

[5] See C. N. Cochrane: *Christianity and Classical Culture*.

[6] See Ernst Troelts: *The Special Teaching of the Christian Churches*.

[7] See E. D. Martin: *The Behaviour of Crowds, a Psychological Study*.

[8] See Arthur Koestler: *The Yogi and the Commissar*, p. 202.

[9] *The Russia I Believe In, The Memoirs of Samuel N. Harper, 1902-1941*, p. 265.

[10] To Mlle. Lespiasse, January 26, 1770. *Letters*, II, 800, cited in W. Stark, *The History of Economics in its Relations to Social Development*, p. 69.

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