

# BOLSHEVIST POET-MYSTICS

BY HÉLÈNE ISVOLSKY

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FOR the last three years, the most profound mystery has veiled Russia — a mystery that should be explained, were it only to aid in comprehending the Bolshevik menace, which weighs so heavily upon the civilized world. One must seek first to understand the soul of a people violently shaken by Revolution, for Bolshevism is not merely a social and economic phenomenon, but is also — and perhaps especially — a psychological phenomenon of extreme complexity.

The mysterious soul of the real Russia is not at all incomprehensible. It is taking form, little by little, giving outward manifestations of itself, notably through the written word. There is a Bolshevik literature and (what especially concerns us here) a Bolshevik poetry. 'Moscow,' the Russian publishing house, is about to issue in Berlin the first number of a literary review, *The Russian Book*, edited by M. Jastchenko, the former professor of international law. This brochure offers a curious approach to Russian literary life under the communist régime, from which we may gain some precious information.

Russian men of letters are divided into two groups, one of which has settled itself abroad, M. M. Mereskovsky, Bounin, Kuprin, Count Alexis Tolstoy, and others, all distinguished writers; whilst the other group has remained in Russia and has attached itself, more or less, to the Bolsheviks. We say 'more or less,' for it would be a blunder to think that all of those who live and work in Russia are of necessity active Bolsheviks.

Without doubt there are Bolshevik writers, pure and simple, who serve the cause of the Soviets; but there are also literary men who live and write under the new régime, which is quite another matter; and who are often kept in Russia by force. Finally, there are those to whom Bolshevism is a bad dream, a passing cloud, but who live within themselves, afar from all political agitation. We might accuse them of indifference; Dante would have placed them between Heaven and Hell.

In spite of the appalling economic conditions of Russia, the lot of literary men is relatively pleasanter than that of the other subjects of the Republic of Soviets. No doubt because they have no desire whatever to imitate Plato's example, the Bolsheviks have not driven the poets from the Communist Paradise and have, quite the contrary, offered them refuge and protection. But, on the other hand, they keep a vigilant watch upon all their literary work, and the liberty of the press is dead in Russia, along with all the other liberal 'prejudices' of the old order of things. A play of Gorky's was withdrawn from the repertory because of its anti-revolutionary character, and it is the group of so-called 'Proletarian Poets' who enjoy all the favors of the governments. 'Proletarian Poets,' 'Imaginists,' 'Scythians,' — thus are the canes of the Bolshevik Parnassus entitled. This has aided an extraordinary poetical flowering during the last three years.

Professor Jastchenko writes:

'In an epoch when the complete ab-

sence of indispensable books, of paper, of scientific, historical and political works, is making itself felt, the most useless "articles of luxury" in literature are thrown upon the market in the form of lyric poetry. Is it because the popular mind, unable to give itself to quiet reflection, overflows into sentiments which seek expression in songs at once so melancholy and so dreamy? Or else, have we come back to the earliest springs of our historic life, and, after everything has been lost, does nothing remain to us but fairy stories and lyric poetry, the initial manifestations of a people's consciousness?

It is important to observe that a great number of the poets celebrated even before the Revolution have remained in Russia — such men as Goumileff, Alexander Blok, Viatcheslave Ivanoff, Serge Gorodetzky, Valery Brioussoff, Anna Achmatowa, Andrew Beliy, whose names have survived through Bolshevism as they have survived through the old régime in Russia, because they belong to literature and not to politics.

Unfortunately, we have very little information as to their present activity. The greater part are at work for the Literary Section of the Commissariat of Public Instruction, or for the anthology called *Universal Literature*, which Gorky is editing and which publishes translations of foreign masterpieces. *The Russian Book* gives a list of the principal translations, as well as the titles of new works which have appeared or which are to appear in Russia. But it gives no details with regard to these new books and so it is premature to make any conclusions, in one way or another, on the intrinsic value of literary effort in Russia nowadays.

Is the monopoly which is in fact if not in right, exercised over letters by the Government of the Soviets, auspicious for the free flight of human thought and inspiration? It seems difficult to be-

lieve. Besides, the paper crisis which exists in Russia, creates a serious obstacle to the expansion of Bolshevik literature.

However, some Russian publishers installed at Berlin, have recently issued several little collections of prose and verse, signed by five Bolshevik writers, of whom four are poets. These are Alexander Blok, Andrew Beliy, Serge Essenin, and N. Kliouieff, whom M. Jastchenko calls the 'Revolutionary Slavophiles,' and who have formed a revolutionary group of 'Scythians,' wishing to imply by their name that they defy the classic civilization of the Occident. Add to these names that of Ivanoff-Rasoumnik, fanatic Communist theorist, commentator on the work of the Scythians and their eloquent defender. Ivanoff-Rasoumnik is earnest and genuine, and gives evidence in his writings of a fairness and a candor which are not discoverable among the Scythians. However, he is not an adept in official Bolshevism, and is even perceptibly at some distance from it. Thus he writes:

'The dictatorship of a party, the grasp of iron, already begin to make themselves felt and cannot continue. I know that terror within and without is not my pathway, but what road am I to follow? The only road: not to wash my hands of it, not to consecrate to destruction the evolution of the true revolutionary socialism. The press is destroyed — let us fight for the resurrection of the press! Political foes are hurled into prison — let us demand proceedings and judgment for them! We must make straight again the line of revolutionary action, which Bolshevism, drunk with victory, runs the risk of distorting.'

And, further: 'Did I not understand Lenin to say that as soon as the social revolution has triumphed in Russia, a world war ought to commence, since

it is only at the point of the bayonet that the Idea can be carried throughout the world? I believe in that Idea, but I do not believe in bayonets' points. I am against all war, and so against revolutionary war.'

It is with complex and troubled feelings that we have leafed through these little volumes of Russian poetry, which open strange vistas into the Bolshevik world. In the first place, there is *Twelve* by Alexander Blok, a poem written in 1917, that is to say, at the dawn of Bolshevism, which is certainly the strongest of work and the most faithful reflection of the Russian revolutionary period. No tinsel fripperies adorn this red epic, sober-hued and realistic, ironic and bitter. The Twelve are Red Guards who, with bayonets fixed, are making a revolutionary march. A snowstorm whirls about their steps, balls whistle in the deserted streets, and death is all about them. They push on, feverish, uneasy, going from love to slaughter, from ecstasy to blasphemy. On the snow the corpse of a woman — slaughtered by one of the Twelve.

A little farther on, the Twelve meet a bourgeois, '*the bourgeois*,' attended by a mangy dog with thick fur and a short tail. The poet explains to us that this famishing dog, the dog without a kennel, who rubs himself against the bourgeois, is the 'old world,' at the dawn of the new Russia. Rifle-fire is always crackling.

'Trakh-takh-takh! The echo after  
Rolls through houses, rattling low,  
And the storm with rumbling laughter  
Rings and jingles in the snow . . .  
With that sovereign step they're walking  
At their heels the hungry hound;  
While in front, the red flag bearing,  
In the snow storm undetected,  
From the bullets free, protected,  
Walks with soft and gentle measure  
Through the snow's clear pearly treasure,  
In a wreath of roses white,  
Jesus Christ — the guiding light.'

What is the meaning of this mystic end to a realistic poem — the appearance of Christ's face beneath the hail of rifle balls, amid the raucous cries of the soldiery? What did Alexander Blok want to say when he placed the Christ at the head of the Twelve? By what supreme irony, or by what morbid exaltation of a faith reversed, has he placed between His hands the bloody standards?

Yet it is strange that this face of Christ seems to haunt not only the author of the Twelve, but the other Bolshevik poets as well. They wish the Christ to be with them, although at bottom they hate Him. They wish to enlist Him, too, and to push him before them on the 'revolutionary march.'

Ivanoff-Rasoumnik begins his preface to the works of Beliy and of Essenin with these words: 'Christianity and Socialism,' and a little farther on he writes: 'All the diverse forms of Socialism, Syndicalism, and Anarchism, we may sum up in these words, "the religious idea of Socialism." New faith and new knowledge, which shall replace the old faith and the old knowledge.'

So the communist thinkers have not escaped from the mysticism of their race. In their very denial of all the ancient dogma, they still have need of a dogma of some sort, and they find in Socialism less the reversal of economic and social values, than the reversal of moral values. Bolshevism, for them, is not a political system, but a religion, the necessary evolution of Christianity, something which is to acquire in the eyes of humanity the same mystic value as the teachings of the Gospel.

It seems to us, however, that these thinkers have not known how to create a new God, and that their gestation of their philosophic idea has not been long enough nor serious enough. In fact, they are content to transform God into their own image, and to stick a red flag into His hand. It is not a new Christ

whom they adore, but rather Antichrist, whom they had no need to invent. Serge Essenin, who is the chosen prophet of this new revelation, cries, 'Lord, I shall make Thee different!' or again, 'May my voice devour Thee, O my Lord!' It is always by means of violence that he proceeds, and this is what he tells us:

I do not seek Redemption  
Through his Passion and his Death;  
Mine is another teaching  
That shall outlast the stars.

I stretch hands toward the moon,  
I shall crush it like a nut.  
I seek no reachless heaven;  
I want no falling snow.

A new Faith, without Cross or Passion.

Rejoice, Zion,  
Scatter thy light.  
A new Nazareth  
Flowers in heaven.  
A new Savior, riding on an ass,  
Comes from the Universe.  
Our Faith is Force,  
Our truth ourselves.

We seem to have heard that before!

Essenin promises to the faithful a new city where dwells 'The God of the living,' a terrestrial Paradise — that is to say, a Communist Paradise. And this is how Ivanoff-Rasoumnik sums up the new religion: 'The poet has perceived a new universal Word, and it is in its name that he battles against the ancient God, as once Jacob wrestled in the desert. There is no blasphemy here, but a fight with God, and every fight with God is a divine confirmation of a new Word. In Christianity, the sufferings of one man are to save the whole Universe. In the Socialism which is coming, by the suffering of the Universe, every man is to be saved.'

We know already that Ivanoff-Rasoumnik is a genuine fanatic; he wants to save the face of Bolshevism at any price, and to explain to perplexed outsiders the prophecies of Essenin,

but the essence of these prophecies seems to escape his candor. He does not recognize that Essenin is a false mystic, and that, if he struggles with God, it is by a destructive rather than a creative instinct.

'Lord, I will make Thee otherwise,' and 'I want no reachless Heaven' — these are the dominant ideas of this strange philosophy. To found a Paradise on earth, to set the ideal close to the soil, to bind Heaven to earth by a ladder which our poet may scale without effort or fatigue — such is the dream of Essenin.

The prophet, however, is better endowed for poetry than for mystic revelations. His work is extremely original, sometimes strong, always bold. There are unexpected glittering passages, which strike and delight the imagination. The insolent defiance which he throws out to God, is invested with an almost Biblical solemnity. These are the strange images of a very Bolshevik Cosmos through which Essenin passes, walking 'head down, on the clouds, as on a field of wheat'; —

With the scream of the tempests' dread,  
I'll break in two the Earth, our Mother,  
The way one crumbles bread.  
The thin Equator I'll erase,  
Beneath my knees' fierce rubs,  
And four Suns shall go rolling  
Down hill like golden tubs,  
Their golden hoops a-shaking,  
Whilst a Universe is breaking.

I crush the earth beneath my feet,  
As great Tsar Peter did.  
In a maudlin trance  
I make death dance  
To drunk accordion music.

In spite of such an unchained Scythian gait, Essenin undeniably has much talent. But he has no grace, tenderness, nor true emotion. This is, perhaps, too much to ask of a barbarian — for Essenin is a barbarian — and a violent individual who proposes to take Heaven by assault.

The thought of Andrew Beliy is less dull, his mystic symbolism less disturbed than that of Essenin. In his view, Russia has been crucified, buried, left for dead. But she must revive, she is reviving, and soon she is to save the world.

This idea of Russia as a national and religious Messiah is not new. It has already been expressed by the Slavophiles of the old régime, and, in magisterial fashion, by Dostoievsky. He, too, was proclaiming the mystic calling of Russia when he wrote: 'He who believes in Russia, knows that she will endure absolutely all things, and will remain in essence the same Holy Russia that she has always been.' 'Holy Russia,' 'land of miracles,' the Russian people, 'the bearer of God,' that is the idea which incessantly reappears in Russian literature of the nineteenth century. Beliy merely takes it up again to transform it according to the Bolshevik dogma, for to him Bolshevism is the dazzling confirmation of this conception of Russia as the redeemer of humanity.

Russia, my country,  
Spouse clad in sunlight,  
Toward whom rise  
All men's eyes —  
Clearly I see thee,  
Bearing God,  
O'er the serpent triumphant.

In my breast something stirs  
With keenest emotion.

Sons well-belovéd,  
'Christ is arisen!'

'The Christ is Risen,' by Andrew Beliy, is a powerful poem, infinitely more powerful and profound than the incantations of an Essenin. Some of these lines cause the soul of a veritable mystic to stand out in sharp relief:

A sadness, divine and intense,  
Falls like the violent blows  
Of Heaven upon the immense  
Globe, heavy and old.

But this sounds the hour of resurrection:

Russia, to-day a bride,  
Receive the news of Spring!  
Salvation! Resurrection!  
All things, all, all  
Proclaim what could not be.

The screaming locomotive  
That flies along the rails  
Repeats, 'Long may it live —  
The Internationale!'

The misty drops of rain,  
The telegraphic wires  
Cry, and repeat again,  
'The Internationale!'

Thus does the sacred joy of Beliy break out. This holy joy, one must admit, is inexplicable in view of the present spectacle of ravaged and bloody Russia. Is it not rather a burial than a resurrection? It is precisely this optimism, pushed to the extremes of exaltation which is most striking among the Bolshevik poets.

What! Not a cry of anguish? Not a note of doubt? And is the Bolshevik world, after three years of terror and famine, really the best world, in the eyes of the Essenins and Beliy?

It is with a feeling of deep relief that we have run through the last of these little miscellanies, signed by the poet Kliouieff. Kliouieff is of humble peasant origin, and his work breathes the odors of the earth, of the fields, and of labor. His *Songs of the Isba* (peasant hut) and *Earth and Iron* reveal a poet at once profound and tender, who makes one think of Robert Burns. Unluckily, it is almost impossible to translate his work, essentially Slavic and rustic, which holds all the riches of the popular language of Russia, which remain unknown to the writers of the city. In these poems, still so close to primitive inspiration, reappear the sweet and humble

landscapes of peasant Russia, the wood village, the *isba*, and all its familiar surroundings. It is the shut-in, dreamy life of the long winter evenings about the big stove, it is the glebe moistened by the rains, gilded by the sun-light. It is all the mystery of the Russian country-side, which pursues its existence, scarcely troubled by the distant revolutionary turmoil of the great cities. Kliouieff surely has the stuff of a true poet, perhaps of a great poet.

Here, under the roof of the *isba*, there are neither shrieks of pride nor delirious prophecies. The Russia of the farms, plunged in its dream, which is at once secular and mystic, prays, meditates, works and sows. In the midst of the Russian chaos, the peasant, perhaps alone, retains his sober judgment and recognizes the true value of simple things. Is not here the place to look for salvation? For the poems of Kliouieff give an impression of freshness and blessed harmony — infinitely blessed after the phantasmagoria of the 'Scythians.'

Kliouieff has a delicate and lively imagination, like a child's. The world of the *isba* is for him a marvellous world, warmly colored, where everything, even to the familiar animals, even to the utensils of the humblest home, is filled with a mysterious life and seems to speak with him or to make him magic signs. As in *The Blue Bird* of Maeterlinck, things have names of their own, and play a helpful rôle in the life of man. At the death of his mother, like himself a peasant, Kliouieff felt a profound nostalgia descend upon the *isba*:

The stove is an orphan. The saucepan, all in tears  
Keeps murmuring to the andirons, that its mistress is dead.  
The pail sighs to the mop-cloth,  
For the porch is washed no more.  
Oh, how joyously the water used to ripple when she cleaned!

The lad, squatting behind the stove, prattles,  
He says that the cemetery is pleasant to the newcomer.

And that the crosses of the tombs murmur amongst themselves,

Telling of the Eternal, which has no name.

The *isba* frowns, and a window  
Transfixes the moist obscurity  
With its eye of lead.

The death of this peasant mother reappears in another poem of Kliouieff's. In his eyes, as in those of all the Russian people, death is no menacing phantom, but a kindly visitor; for death is the natural and necessary passing of a gray and humble life to a marvellous life, a happy migration to the land of fairy tales. This is again the *isba*, which

Breathes like a fir-tree, bent beneath the snow.  
In every corner, clustered shadows whisper,  
And from its stall the lean calf lows.  
Blown by the wind, past garden flower beds,  
A handkerchief goes tossing, like a veil.  
The silence groans.

The cranes afar are crying:  
'We bear the mother soul beyond the seas,  
Where by the Dawn the surging Sun is cradled.  
There dwell the saints, Dmitry, Nikolai, Vlass,<sup>1</sup>  
The holy ones, clad in their glorious robes.  
And in a cope of living colors, there Saint John  
Lays Jordan's water on their holy heads.

The paradise of Kliouieff is hardly an abstract heaven, and his saints clad in glorious colors, are real flesh and bone. For him, as for every soul at once mystic and naïve, heaven is a transcendent image of the earth, or rather (and this is perhaps the essence of the true Russian mysticism) the earth is a confused image of heaven, a formal image of a real and better world, which already appears. The earth is holy, the *isba* is holy, the work of the laborer is holy, for these are all symbols. And nature herself is a holy temple, full of the Divine Mystery, a

<sup>1</sup> Three saints whom Russians hold in special veneration.



Forest, where each branch is like a taper,  
 Where from the pine the Cherubin  
 Sets altar lights a-gleam, and gives  
 Communion to all those that hear the voice  
 Of the all-mother, guardian of the tombs.  
 There, as I laid my kiss on Youth,  
 I heard Dawn answer Dawn,  
 I heard the storm-cock sing,  
 Whilst like a swarm of Stars,  
 The Face rose with a thousand eyes.

Time drops a veil, obscures the image  
 But since that time flute music rings about me.  
 I have seen the face of Sound and have known  
     music,  
 Setting my lips to flowers,  
 Far from your mildewed lips.

In these lines the poet of the *isba* and  
 the soil rises to a very high pitch of in-  
 spiration, and seems to live, like a true  
 seer, in a luminous world of his own of  
 an intense spirituality. This subtle  
 spiritualizing of the earthly life appears  
 equally in a little poem of Kliouieff's  
 dedicated to the peasant's horse:

The sledge is wise, the cart has wit,  
 For all its wooden dress,  
 The little horse has many a thought  
 He never dares express.

At the vespers of the cattle,  
 Within the stable's shade,  
 The murmur of the ewes is sad  
 As that the wind has made.

Like the repentant publican's  
 Is the little horse's sigh,  
 'My Father and my Lord, my God,  
 How near to Thee am I?'

'The dreams I dreamed beneath the yoke  
 Shall they be all in vain?  
 Shall I drink waves celestial  
 To ease me of my pain?'

Poor jade, companion of my life,  
 Toiler in lowly things,  
 You are the symbol of all God's  
 Horses with flaming wings.

Labor is joyous, harvest rich.  
 Your toil, from dawn to dark,  
 Has made our common stable grow  
 A likeness of the Ark.

A beam from heaven seems to brighten  
 the wooden village of Kliouieff, a ray  
 of consolation and of hope. Is it not  
 from this very humble Ark that the  
 Russia of to-morrow may come forth?

Such is the present state of literature  
 in the land of the Soviets. In writing  
 these lines, we have made a great effort  
 for impartiality in measuring (so far as  
 a contemporary can) the true rank of  
 these writers. In spite of the goodwill  
 of the Maecenases of Moscow, it seems  
 hard to believe that the age of Bolshe-  
 vism can ever be regarded as a golden  
 age in Russian art or literature. For the  
 creation of a perfect art, there must  
 be a people who have attained a perfect  
 equilibrium, whether spiritual or intel-  
 lectual, an equilibrium which is the cul-  
 minating point of a powerful and defin-  
 ite evolution.

Fortunate peoples have no history;  
 but have unfortunate peoples an art?  
 In any event, how can this equilibrium  
 essential to the development of art and  
 creative thought be had in a country  
 which is in an epoch of violent transi-  
 tion? Bolshevik poetry is a strange  
 flower, sometimes captivating, but it is  
 a flower soon withering, precocious and  
 diaphanous, overwhelmed with bitter-  
 ness, burnt by the torrid breath of a  
 gigantic brasier. Flower of madness,  
 flower of pride, too, for the Bolsheviks  
 have colored it with all their hopes.

Yet it happens, sometimes, that a  
 fire passing through a forest, spares by  
 a miracle some solitary tree, which in  
 the midst of disaster, goes on with its  
 normal growth, happy and necessary.  
 So it is that in this troublous literature,  
 in which resound 'the drunk cries of the  
 accordion' a word, a thought, a har-  
 monious and powerful rime surging sud-  
 denly out, brings to the reader a pre-  
 cious and subtle joy. The accordion of  
 the red prophets has not been able to  
 deaden the mysterious tones of that

flute which haunts the memory of Kliouieff. Russian literature is not dead and will not know death, for it is the emanation of a national genius, infinitely more profound than Bolshevism.

One need not partake of the somewhat superficial optimism of Belyi, or wish to prophesy after the fashion of Essenin, in order to pronounce here with confidence the word, 'Resurrection.'

## THE NARIKIN: WAR WEALTH IN JAPAN. II

BY FÉLICIEN CHALLAYE

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JAPAN'S newly-rich 'receive' more than has formerly been the custom, sometimes in their own luxurious homes, more often at a hotel or tea-house rented entire for the occasion. I was told of one narikin who telephoned to a large hotel situated at a beautiful sea-side resort for seventeen rooms. He brought only three guests with him, but it pleased him to have a big bill to pay. Sumptuous dinners at restaurants and tea-houses continue to be one of the favorite ways of entertaining. Restaurants in the European style are more common than formerly. Their menus are often commonplace, but people patronize them for a change of fare. However, Japanese prefer, as a rule, to dine in native establishments which have become widely advertised either for their luxury or their freakishness. Here you can procure excellent shrimp and oysters, delicious fish, and strange, delicate salads. The price of these dinners seems very high to one who recalls charges a few years ago. The newspapers report one place in Kobe which will not serve a meal for less than \$25.00. A Tokyo narikin invited his friends to a dinner which cost \$50.00 a plate. A mine owner in Kiyushu gave a dinner

of fifty covers at \$150 a plate, in addition to the charges for the geisha girls.

The geishas in fact vie with the automobile as the most expensive luxury of the narikins. The girls are recruited from the fairest maidens of the country, taught to dance, sing, play native instruments, serve tea, arrange flowers, embroider, converse, and compose poems. They are employed, like pretty table decorations, from the time they are six or seven years old, beautifully robed, and with ornamental coiffures; they serve the viands and dance two or three times in the course of the evening, to the accompaniment of songs and instrumental music by the older geishas. They are the charm and the joy of the occasion. The war, which was responsible for the narikins themselves, has multiplied the geishas. There are three times as many in Osaka to-day as a few years ago; and they totaled in all Japan by the end of the war some 50,000 earning in the aggregate more than \$40,000,000 yearly. Their average earnings were \$800 (1600 yen) apiece while many government officials even to-day are not paid more than \$200 a year. In addition, the gifts they receive must greatly exceed their regular wages.