

THE RUSSIAN SOUL: LABEL OR LIBEL?

BY BORIS SUVORIN

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'THE soul of another,' says an old Russian proverb, 'is darkness.' Yet whenever Russia or Russia's art or Russia's misfortunes attract attention, everything, no matter what, — from Chaliapin and the Ballet Russe to the revolutions of Kerenskii and Lenin, — is explained with the same catchword. It is 'the Russian soul.'

This catchword is supposed to explain the whole thing. The phrase, it must be admitted, is not a bad one, for no doubt the 'soul' of a people does explain its life, its art, and its politics; but we must understand that mere words, in and of themselves, explain nothing. Pasting labels right and left will never solve the problem.

It is so easy to say: 'A woman loves her husband and yet deceives him — oh, well, the Russian soul.' 'A pure young girl gives herself to a worthless scoundrel — it is the Russian soul.' 'Soldiers dying for the Tsar — the Russian soul.' 'Soldiers murdering their officers — the Russian soul.' 'Nijinskii dancing a ballet — the Russian soul.' 'Lenin massacring his fellow countrymen — the Russian soul.' All the more reason for me to say that *tout expliquer* is not by any means *tout comprendre*, and that those who take such delight in this multicolored label are guilty of a great sin against their contemporaries.

Have these people who, with an inexpressible airiness, describe the unfortunate and 'mysterious' (this is to make the writer more interesting) Russian soul — or, as they sometimes say, 'Slavic soul' — ever had anything to do with it? Have they ever tried to find in that vast array of paradoxes, of good and of bad, anything more than a well-turned phrase — helped out with a few daubs of local color? To be sure, there are exceptions, writers of talent who do not stop the minute they strike something incomprehensible to them, but who study and who even reach conclusions. But these, alas, are so few that their voices are drowned beneath the chorus chanting in unison the same refrain about the unhappy Slavic or Russian soul.

I have even read an interview with Trotskii, in a great newspaper, in which one of these marvelous psychologists found Slavic characteristics in the Napoleon of the Red Internationale. How sad to reflect that M. Bronstein — who for some reason or other wants to be called Trotskii — has not a single drop of Slavic blood in his veins! But the writer's comments made a very good article and he really wanted to find something Slavic in the rather Mephistophelian features of Comrade Trotskii.

I do not mean to say that the Rus-

sian soul is as clear as a mountain brook and that one has only to look into it to see straight to the bottom. By no means. I merely wish to protest against the bad habit of treating our people, our history, art, and science as if they were something abnormal. Not only do I find this unsatisfactory, but, more than that, I find it dangerous. People will always have to deal with Russia, and if they are content with mere labels, they will never really know anything about her, and will reap nothing but disillusion.

Look at the Germans! Sentimental as they are, — when they are listening to a Schumann melody or drinking beer with a pretty *fräulein* in the moonlight at some inn among historic ruins, — even they study Russia, know her and understand her. They are the ones who are conquering Russia, and who will continue to do so. They are the ones who, under William II, — the most monarchistic monarch in the world, — sent Lenin into Russia. They knew very well what they were doing when, in the early days of our first revolution, — the one that has been hypocritically called great and peaceful, — when the Allies were applauding this ‘magnificent act’ of the popular conscience, all the best officers of our navy were massacred at Wiborg and at Helsingfors, beginning with Népénin, the admiral of the Baltic Fleet. ‘Mere coincidence,’ someone may say. I do not believe it. The revolution was as warmly welcomed at Berlin as it was in London or Paris. The Allies fell into a trap prepared by the Germans because they were sentimentalists, moonstruck dreamers, and disciples of that sublime formula, the mystery of the Russian soul.

Read the pages written by the French Ambassador at Petrograd, M. Paléologue, and you will see the terror due to his perfect understanding that be-

hind this revolution was nothing but an approaching debacle. M. Paléologue was not a dreamer. He knew well enough that it is not easy to dissect a people’s soul. There are phenomena that he could not understand. Every soul is a mystery; but he saw in the Russian mind various phases. He wanted to know and wanted to understand, to break the mystery.

Alas, there was no one to believe him. Big words and trifling talk won the day, and every day brought closer with infernal speed the Peace of Brest-Litovsk. It was Germany, practical Germany, that really knew Russia, that won on the Eastern Front, and not the crowd of sentimentalists who hymned the beauty of the Russian revolutionary soul.

The German, so sentimental in the moonlight, is always practical enough by day. Russia attracted him through her immensity and her riches, and a vast colony of the future *Weltmeister* extended from the Vistula to the waters of the Pacific. They were not satisfied with saying ‘the Russian soul, the sublime Russian soul, the incomparable Russian soul.’ They hunted for reasons, they sought the good and the bad in this great people, one of whom I have the honor to be. They studied Russia and the Russian character with all its qualities, good and bad.

When the war came, the Germans showed that they were not mistaken. They knew well enough the value of the Russian soldier, the Russian officer — and also, unfortunately, the Russian politician. They knew well enough how terrible the shock would be, and if they took their time about transferring to the Russian front several divisions from the Marne, they knew well enough what they were doing. With the amazing exactness that characterizes them, our enemies knew what they had to know. They were quite as well

aware as the French that Chaliapin is a great artist, that the Ballet Russe is the very summit of choregraphic art; they read Turguenev, Tolstoi, and Dostoevskii, but they never forgot our great soldiers — men like Suvoroff, Skobeleff, and Kutuzoff, concerning most of whom the French, thanks to the label, knew almost nothing. The very name of the most famous of our generals, the great Suvoroff, is changed to Souvaroff ('sometimes called Suvoroff,' remarks the magnificent *Larousse* parenthetically). Kutuzoff, to whom fell the great honor of conquering Napoleon in 1812, is well known among the Germans, for he might have been their enemy. They studied the campaigns of this pupil of Suvoroff's while our friends the Allies were reflecting that the cold and the Russian soul had combined to overcome Napoleon's incomparable army. In the minds of the Germans who approached our literature, our history, and our politics, there was always the question 'Why?' which had to be cleared up. With the French quite the reverse. There was no question why so long as they had their formula — 'the Russian soul.'

My father, Alexei Suvorin, founder of *Novoe Vremia*, friend of Paul Déroulède, friend of France, could never explain why the French are unwilling to learn to know Russia. This old journalist, the best man of his kind in Russia, was always asking why the journalists and the writers of France did not care to know. I was a little boy thirteen or fourteen years old when the fêtes took place at Toulon, and the reception of our sailors at Paris — fêtes that had been organized in the beautiful French capital which all Russians, from the humblest immigrant to the greatest nobleman, admire. I shall never forget the moment when, perched on the coachman's seat, a simple little boy with tears in his eyes at the sight of

this great Paris throng, I was hailed with acclaim because I was a little Russian boy with a little Russian flag in his hand, and because the good old coachman carried another little Russian flag in his tall white hat. That was the honeymoon of the union between Tsarist Russia and Republican France.

I shall never believe the abominable slander, 'made in Germany,' which had it that our good relations were simply good business. But there are Frenchmen still who, with an unbelievable frivolity, spread these silly legends abroad. With their 'trips of the Grand Dukes,' 'boyars,' and their 'knouts,' they turned everything into ridicule and insisted that white bears walked up and down the Nevskii Prospect in Petrograd. They interested themselves in trifling details without ever seeking to understand the growth of our great country. The white bear, the Russian soul, the boyars — one of these words is worth about as much as another. But people cling to the false and deceitful formula, to words that mean nothing at all.

Nevertheless every writer, every careful reader, every journalist, who takes even a little interest in Russia and things Russian, can easily see how closely we are linked to France and to French culture. I do not mean to say that we have studied the French mind and the French character, but in our relations with France, which have often been so bloody, we always sought something that might explain the spirit of the French. If we do not know it to the bottom, at least we do not make such stupid blunders as this, nor know the French mind so little as the French know the Russian soul.

Unfortunately that is not true of the French press. Again and again ideas about Russia have been printed which can be characterized only as freaks.

Why does the French press commit blunders like these, which can lead only to misunderstanding? Alas, I can come to one conclusion only: people do not want to understand us.

'Yes,' someone may say to me, 'but you are an émigré yourself, a journalist who has lost contact with his country, a Bohemian, a kind of Wandering Jew. You do not know what is going on in Russia. The Russian soul is making itself anew before your eyes and you see nothing. Those who have studied it in Russia know it better than the Russian who has been torn from his fatherland.'

Well, they may be right — these people who entertain me with these opinions, sometimes logical, sometimes trivial, but never proved. Yet even though handicapped — pardon the sporting phrase — by the abyss yawning between the Russia of our dreams and the internationalized Russia of the Soviets, still we remain Russian, and we see only a complete lack of understanding where Russia is concerned. We see that Russia is falling into the most terrible oblivion, and that only conventional questions are being asked about her. It is our deep and constant friendship, almost our love, I might say, for France that requires us Russian writers and journalists of our generation to tell this truth frankly to our friends, even at the cost of appearing a trifle blunt. Recognizing our own faults and the errors of our judgment, nevertheless we insist on making known the truth which is so cleverly concealed by our enemies and by ignorance of Russian affairs.

Meantime the Russian writer, Maxim Gor'kii, who has just broken off his relations with Red Moscow, is publishing his impressions of the Russian soul. He finds immediate belief because he is an authority. Gor'kii is a man who ought to know — a democrat him-

self, of peasant origin, 'a self-made man,' and a talented writer, he has helped to organize and follow the whole development of the revolution. He has been able to study this strange soul. He had already founded a school of revolutionary propaganda before 1917. Surely from him we ought to hear praises of the Russian people, the holy Russian democracy, and the 'Russian soul.' But unhappily it is not so at all. Once a vagabond, Gor'kii has become rich. He has attained influence in the Soviets and now there are no crimes of which he does not accuse his people.

In a newspaper which snatched up immediately these words of Gor'kii's, I have just read that ours is the most barbarous, ferocious, the most cruel people in the world. Gor'kii mentions horrible examples with almost Sadistic joy.

Himself a waif of the great revolution for which he cleared the way, and which he saw degenerate into massacre and famine, he blames all its horror on the unfortunate people who gave him his fortune and his glory, and made of him their judge, almost their god. He was one of the organizers of Bolshevism, he was one of those who spurred on the Russian soul to its moral downfall. Was he not a forerunner of this accursed and cruel revolution when he devoted his great talent to hymning the favorite heroes of his novels, these *bosiaki* (vagabonds) who after all are nothing but idealist apaches?

A renegade is always one of the most malignant beings and the most effective slanderer. When he pronounces this sacred formula, 'the Russian soul,' I foresee danger in the chance that someone may believe these calumnies. With his talent Gor'kii is strengthening the chorus of those who prate about 'the Russian soul.'

If we take extracts from Zola's *La Terre*, or from *Germinal*, we see in-

stances of terrible cruelty, but is that the French soul? I do not wish to exalt the Russian character. I wish neither to deny its vices nor to exalt its great virtues. A friend of that France which we Russians hope always to see side by side with us, I see a danger in this formula and I utter a warning:

Study Russia, study our history, read our great masters. Come closer to us and do not do it solely by such en-

chanted excursions as that of Herriot, the Socialist Mayor and Deputy of Lyon, to Moscow. The Russian soul is not altogether mysterious for him who wishes to understand, and even if it were we should have to seek for the key to the mystery and not credit slanders instantly merely because they magnify the importance of an abominable label with absolutely nothing behind it.

A WAY WITH LIARS

BY A. N. M.

From the *Manchester Guardian*, May 2
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WE heard that some people named Chivers had taken the Wyverns, and I opened out affably to Mr. Chivers when I overtook and identified him on our hill. I said I hoped they were pleased with their house and with the place generally. 'We are quiet here,' I said, 'but for those who care for the country it is n't a bad place.' Chivers said that he preferred nature to anything, and he mentioned that his half-brother, another lover of nature, was coming to stay with them as soon as they were settled. 'Of course,' he said, 'his specialty is old china.' I said that my wife was very much interested in it too, and that I was sure she would like to compare notes with his brother.

The next day I happened to travel with Blakiston, and I asked him whether he knew Chivers. I said I had spoken to him, and that he seemed a decent fellow. Blakiston said he did n't know him, but he knew his brother. My recently acquired knowledge

prompted me to say, 'Is that the half-brother?'

'Half-brother?' said Blakiston; 'he has n't a half-brother.'

'Yes, he has,' I said. 'He told me so. Interested in old china.'

'Curious!' said Blakiston. 'I never heard of a half-brother.'

'Is there a stepbrother?' I said. 'But I'm sure he said half-brother.'

'Nothing of the kind,' said Blakiston. He might have been annoyed.

It was a day or two later that I met Blakiston at a tea-shop, and after greetings he said: 'See that man in the corner? That's Harold Chivers. I'll introduce you.' He did so, and we sat down at his table. Presently I said that I understood he was very much interested in china. He said: 'No; we do a bit with Singapore, but our main trade is with India.'

I said: 'Oh, but I mean old china.'

'I've never got up much interest in history,' he said, 'but I believe