

# Russia's Crowded History

**POLITICAL AND DIPLOMATIC HISTORY OF RUSSIA.** By George Vernadsky. Boston: Little, Brown & Company. 1936. \$4.

Reviewed by MICHAEL T. FLORINSKY

**T**HERE is probably no more fascinating and fruitful field for investigation by the historian than that offered by the growth and development of Russia. The imagination of the student is inevitably captured by the interplay of the great social, economic, and political forces that have guided the destinies of the nation from its early days as a small barbaric principality through the successive stages of the centralized Moscovite State, the glittering magnificence of the Empire, to the final establishment of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics. This process of transformation acquires particular significance in view of the opinion of such distinguished observers as Mr. and Mrs. Webb and Professor Laski that Soviet Communism and its new civilization are the logical and inescapable forms of political and social organization toward which the capitalistic world is drifting.

Mr. Vernadsky makes no pretense of having exhausted all the possibilities of this magnificent and captivating theme. Nor would it be reasonable to expect him to succeed in fully encompassing within the limited space of some 440 pages a score of centuries of crowded and often bewildering history. His object is more modest, and the title of his volume suggests the limitations he has imposed upon himself. What he is concerned with in his new volume is the political and diplomatic history of Russia. This would seem to indicate the necessary relegation to the background of the economic, social, and cultural developments of that country. Such developments, needless to say, cannot however be excluded altogether, for the history of any nation told merely in terms of political and diplomatic changes, with no consideration of the great forces that brought about such changes, would be meaningless. While Mr. Vernadsky certainly does not ignore them, he has perhaps not been altogether fortunate in striking the right balance between his discussion of external manifestations of the historical process and his treatment of the fundamental underlying trends. The latter are not infrequently sacrificed to the elaboration of relatively less important details.

Except for the fact that he devotes a few pages at the beginning of his book to a discussion of "Eurasia," meaning "Eastern Europe plus Northern Asia," the general course of Mr. Vernadsky's narrative follows the conventional pattern of the more conservative histories

of Russia. Whether the introduction of the term "Eurasia" really helps to an understanding of the development of Russia is debatable. The bulk of the volume deals with the process of expansion of the Russian State, the transformation of its political structure, and its relations with other nations. The chief object of the author is to set forth the essential facts of this manifold and complex story, rather than to interpret them. Only occasionally does Mr. Vernadsky venture any judgment on the momentous events he describes. Some of these interpretations are eminently sound; such, for instance, as his observation that the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 was the result of a compromise and that it introduced into the social structure of Russia fundamental contradictions "which became the basic cause of the subsequent revolution."

It is more difficult to agree with Mr. Vernadsky's judgment concerning the political situation in Russia in the years immediately preceding the revolution. His characterization of Stolypin's political program as "liberal conservatism" and of Count Kokovtsov as a "moderately progressive" statesman are hardly more than euphemisms. Again, when the author states that "the country at large was weary of revolution and had followed Stolypin's lead since 1907" he unfortunately does not mention the fact that during these years the meager civic liberties granted to Russia in 1905 were suspended and the Empire was governed by a regime of court martials.

The purpose of Mr. Vernadsky's volume, as stated by the author, is to give "a reliable account of the most important developments in Russian policies from the earliest period up to the present, with essential details. On the other hand . . . to emphasize a certain fundamental unity of the Russian historical process which makes the present-day Russian policies only the continuation of age-long development." In the opinion of the reviewer, Mr. Vernadsky was more successful in the first than in the second task he set himself. This may be due in part to the fact that the Soviet Union occupies in his book merely twenty-three pages which deal not only with the political and international but also with the economic and social developments.

In spite of these limitations the volume is a useful one. Mr. Vernadsky's concise presentation of the fundamental facts of Russia's political history will prove a helpful reference book and a welcome addition to college libraries.

*Michael T. Florinsky, a Russian on the faculty of Columbia University, is the author of "The End of the Russian Empire," "Fascism and National Socialism," and other books on history and politics.*



LORD DUNSANY

## War for Amusement

**UP IN THE HILLS.** By Lord Dunsany. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 1936. \$2.

**I**N the happy days before the war, some of the most delightful of light novels were written by an Anglo-Irishman who called himself G. A. Birmingham—stories about Irishmen who did fantastic things like erecting statues to generals who never lived, and looking for buried treasure they did not think was there, and who yet never seemed to become caricatures. That peculiarly delicious vein, which seemed to have ended with "General John Regan" and "Spanish Gold," has been reopened by Lord Dunsany in "Up in the Hills." The beginning, about a deputation from an African republic who come to archæologize in an Irish village (because, as they have very reasonably decided, the white men come to archæologize in Africa, and there ought to be reciprocity), and by disturbing the bones of lake-dwellers cause the village wise wives to call down curses, is in the true and immortal Birmingham manner. And so is its immediate consequence, that the lads of the village, growing anxious at the number of curses flying and hissing about the air, take to the hills; and being in the hills, naturally amuse themselves by starting a war.

But this is not all extravaganza, and it is never farce; it is a literally mortal combat, even if it is undertaken with no more reason than the transitorily mortal combats of Valhalla or the occasionally mortal combats of the football. It is war as it was in the days of King Arthur and Cuchulain, free of Marxian motives and dirty tactics, war in its innocent childhood; and like all children, it is always funny, and always singularly touching,—and always earnest.

We have of late years had a number of books about Ireland, many of them moving and strangely illuminating, but if a Saxon may hazard the opinion, this is certainly one of the wittiest and perhaps the wisest of them all.

# The Artist in Economics

WHAT VEBLEN TAUGHT. *Selected Writings of Thorstein Veblen* edited with an introduction by Wesley C. Mitchell. New York: The Viking Press. 1936. \$3.

Reviewed by ELI GINZBERG

**S**HORTLY after the turn of the century, a young, well-connected, and promising professor of economics at the University of Chicago wrote a letter of recommendation for his teacher and colleague, an older, unworldly, and enigmatic scholar. Veblen, long unorthodox in matters intellectual, had of late given trouble to Mrs. Grundy; even a liberal university could not condone this twofold deviation. He was in search of a job and Wesley Mitchell was aiding in the process. The deliberate and meticulous artificer of quantitative economics penned a letter remarkable for its lack of caution and restraint. After stating that as a student of social questions Veblen had qualifications greater than any man in the country, Mitchell went on to prophesy that fifty years hence Veblen would be recognized as the most important figure among economists of his generation.

Only thirty years have passed but Mitchell has lived to see his youthful enthusiasm justified. No economist, Karl Marx alone excepted, has ever been honored, as Veblen now is, by the publication of an anthology of his most important work. Fitting it is that Mitchell should edit the volume; fortunate it is that he should contribute a lengthy introduction, an open-sesame to Thorstein Veblen, the man and his work.

Respected by the younger generation of economists as a giant in the field, admired by students of intellectual history as one of America's most original thinkers, idolized by social reformers as the Voltaire of the new revolution, Thorstein Veblen is not yet completely secure in his reputation. Skeptics—a few of true stature, the majority incompetents—are still unable to recognize the contributions of Veblen to the social sciences, especially to economics. They search for analyses and find generalizations; they desire to evaluate factual data but are forced to

admire challenging phrases. To them, Veblen is at best an able satirist, at worst a charlatan. The minority is *qua* minority not necessarily wrong. What is the evidence?

Veblen is a monist. Throughout his ten tomes, in "The Theory of the Leisure Class," which marked his debut, as well as in "Absentee Ownership," his last and most mature offering, Veblen played upon the dichotomy of industry and business—of goods and money, of engineers and bankers, of useful work and financial buccaneering. It matters not whether he be discussing instincts, the dynastic state, higher learning, or the industrial arts, his approach remains the same. No systematic treatise, yet all of his writings the epitome of the systematic.

Four theses support his edifice. First,

Veblen contends that the techniques of production largely determine the cultural pattern. Secondly, he points out that in every era ideas exist so pervasive that it is necessary to interpret all institutions, social and intellectual, in terms of these preconceptions. Thirdly, he maintains in opposition to the teachings of Christianity and Classical Economics that labor is not irksome. Perhaps, bread cannot be secured without sweat,

but the sweat is sweet. Man possesses an instinct for workmanship. Finally, Veblen suspects that throughout the ages men have engaged in competitive ostentation: the Bantu chief has his beads and his feathers; the banker, his country estates and his bank accounts.

The most scientifically inclined nation of modern times has followed the piping of the great romantic who offers it *Boden und Blut* in place of laboratories and machines. Within the short span of ten years, the leaders of the Soviet have played havoc with the preconceptions of revolutionaries and with the attitudes of the backward masses. The incendiarism of modern labor leads one to suspect that the instinct of workmanship has become atrophied. Studies in the ethnology of primitives in Australia and in North America suggest that societies free of competitive ostentation do exist; in these, disappearance into the group rather than

emergence from the group is the *summum bonum* of activity.

The four pillars are not too strong. What of the super-structure? Veblen's fundamental juxtaposition of the industrial and pecuniary employments is not logically defensible. Limited resources must be allocated. In capitalistic economies the allocation is performed *via* prices and profits; in communistic economies *via* the insight of the dictator and the power of the secret police. Only ministers of the gospel and professors of education can penetrate the meaning of "production for use rather than for profit."

The skeptics are surely right: Veblen's logic is weak, his facts disputable. Yet, in reading the selections in the anthology one becomes skeptical of the skeptics. Veblen's analysis of the matter-of-fact ethos of modern civilization in contrast to the animism of the past; his working out of the preconceptions of economics; the correlations which he establishes between technology and culture; the brutal dissection of pecuniary emulation in modern capitalism; the studies of social classes in America; and the essays on modern statecraft suggest that the skeptics' criteria of evaluation must be at fault. If genius be the gift of illuminating the obscure, the significantly obscure, in form disciplined and suggestive, then assuredly was Thorstein Veblen a genius.

For a hundred and more years the major tradition in economics—the anti-Veblenians almost without exception belong to this tradition—concerned itself with writing glosses in cumbersome English and in elementary calculus upon Ricardo's "Principles." For the most part, these scientific economists elaborated doctrines and enunciated dogmas as ponderous and impressive as they were irrelevant, at least for understanding if not for action. Economics was a bastard metaphysics and a utilitarian theology. In breaking with this intellectually sterile discipline, Veblen occasionally took liberties both with his facts and his logic. If adherence to the strictest canons of science was able to present us with such valuable nuggets as the abstinence theory of interest and the productivity theory of wages, it is indeed fortunate that Veblen did not fear to become an apostate. Had he sacrificed art on the altar of science, the world might have been deprived of his studies in the dynamics of technology, in the ideology of the engineering class, in the sabotage of the captains of finance, in the psychology of the consumer. The scientific and the artistic are not mutually exclusive approaches. The classical economists drew pencil sketches not unlike Leonardo's anatomical exercises; Veblen painted a Mona Lisa.

Eli Ginzberg is a member of the staff of the School of Business of Columbia University, and the author of "The House of Adam Smith."



THORSTEIN VEBLEN

From a portrait by Edwin Burrage Child, courtesy Fine Arts Gallery, Yale University.