

Through Neighbors' Doorways

A Department Devoted to Affairs Commonly Called "Foreign"

By JOHN PALMER GAVIT

SO RUSSIA is ten years old this month! Seems large for his age. Interesting child, even if most of the neighbors regard him as not quite housebroken, and do not care to have their own children play with him. How much he looks like his father! Acts like him, too. Wonder what he will grow up to be. Difficult to tell, at ten years.

SUPPOSE someone had come to you, say in 1912—only fifteen years ago—absurdly prophesying exactly what has happened since then. Suppose that upon your telling him to go away and occupy his mind with things more nearly related to actuality, he had said:

"Well, then, never mind the prophecy—take it as an hypothetical question. Oblige me by assuming that such things precisely did happen. World War, two revolutions in Russia, obliteration of the autocracy and of the Romanoffs with it, and all the rest of it. Would it take ten years for Russia under its new regime to get to be something fit to live with in the world?"

I do not know what you would have said, but I am sure I should have pontificated somewhat thus:

"In the first place, there couldn't be any World War. Even if one began, it wouldn't last sixty days—three months at the utmost. What is the Hague Peace Palace for, I'd like to know? The horror of such a catastrophe would revolt the soul of the world, and it would be stamped out immediately. In the next place, Russia is a great soggy mass of humanity, incapable of a real uprising. The grip of the autocracy, enforced by centuries of oppression and habit, upon the people, and particularly upon every means of transport and communication over an enormous area; the clutch of organized superstition upon the Russian mentality, are so complete that generations, even centuries, must elapse before any sort of emancipation could be possible. Remember 'Red Sunday' and the abortive revolution of 1907. Where are those people now? No, the old game must be played for a long time yet.

"But even if all these unthinkable things that your disorderly mind has managed to conceive should happen somehow; the autocracy be overthrown and something in the nature of self-government be instituted; there would have to be a long, long period of uproar, experiment, trial and error—mostly error. Nobody living would see more than the beginning of a beginning. I dare say there would be 'restorations,' perhaps other autocracies—remember what happened in France between 1786 and 1875—and whatnot else beyond sane imagining. Ten years? If something appreciably stable should emerge within a hundred years, or two or three hundred, for that matter, it would be the outstanding miracle of history."

WELL, the impossible did happen—as it usually does. In March, 1917, there were bread-riots in Petrograd. A community, a nation, quite as much as an army, marches upon its stomach. People anywhere will put up with almost any old kind of government so long as their stomachs are contented. The saturnalia of corruption in the government, perennially characteristic of despotism everywhere and always, not only had botched the war and wasted the lives of countless Russian soldiers—as it had done in every other war, back to the Crimea or as far further as you please to go—but it had produced hunger in Petrograd. "Worse than a crime, a blunder:" the primary requisite of military strategy is to keep well fed the capital city, locus of the national switchboard. But a thing happened worse than that. There had been bread-riots before, put down with a ruthless fist. This time, so far as I know the first in Russian history, the army balked; refused to fire upon the people. And instantly the magnificent ancient structure of autocracy fell to pieces like a house of cards. So frail is the underpinning of the fortress of authority—anywhere. The Romanoffs, for three centuries embodiment of absolutism, vanished as if they never had been, and the last of them were drowned in their own blood, as from the beginning countless thousands of their fellowmen had been drowned, in the Romanoff behalf. Nicholas II was their true symbol; upon assuming the throne in 1894 he had declared himself unequivocally:

"Let it be understood by all that I shall employ all my powers in the best interests of the people, but the principle of autocracy will be sustained by me as unswervingly as it was by my never-to-be-forgotten father."

Throughout his reign he lived up to that pledge. It is of the irony of fate that he and his luckless family were slaughtered at Ekaterinburg, in that gateway of the Urals through which in pursuance of that policy he and his forebears had sent to miserable exile in Siberia thousands upon thousands of Russia's best.

MALCOLM W. DAVIS, who was in Russia when the first overturn and the abdication of the Tsar took place, wrote to me exuberantly of the ebullition of enthusiasm with which the people sensed their freedom, breaking loose each after his fashion in the glory of what seemed the fulfilment of his wildest dreams. It was a great day for Brotherhood, for the immemorably oppressed; a very bad day for the tyrants little and large, left alone defenseless at the mercy of the vengeful victims upon whom they had feasted mercilessly, and amid the collapse of their own "established order of things."

It was a short-lived dream. Only from March to November. The brief space was full of tumult, as Kerensky and his colleagues, surrounded by elements charged with

every sort of motive, tried frantically and in vain to bring order out of chaos—chiefly to keep Russia's disillusioned and completely demoralized army fighting in the war.

Out of the turmoil emerged the Bolshevik power—a new authority, no less brutal than the old; schooled, by long and bitter experience at the wrong end of the whip, in all its merciless cruelty. The “dictatorship of the proletariat,” as exhibited in Russia since November, 1917, has been the legitimate child of despotism. In no essential respect has its technique differed from that which prevailed before. The old Third Section of the Russian Police, right arm of the vonPlehves and the Pobiedonostsevs, was succeeded by the no less ruthless Cheka. The omnipresent army of private spies and *agents provocateurs* changed its allegiance and to some extent its personnel, but the methods remained substantially the same.

And, oddly enough, the victims were to a great extent the same. Breshkovsky, “Little Mother of the Revolution,” hunted and exiled under the Tsar whom she had conspired to destroy, after a little space during Kerensky's brief day of freedom and glorification, became under the Bolsheviks again the hunted—now classed as a counter-revolutionist! Again began that procession of Russia's best of constructive brains and character, to prison and exile and the place before the firing-squad; together with the most conspicuous of the dispossessed ruling classes.

I DO not recall that any of the folk now excited about Bolshevik outrages stayed awake o' nights or clamored for world ostracism or reprisals against Russia in the days when George Kennan was disclosing the frightful details of oppression under the Autocracy which Nicholas II solemnly vowed to continue; when, right up to his overthrow, it was marching a million people in ten years through those dread portals at Ekaterinburg. In those days quite as now there were arrests without charges upon whispered suspicion or none at all. Men and women disappeared without trace into the dungeons of SS. Peter and Paul and other living tombs whither many of their persecutors now have followed them. An atrocious business as well as a stark folly was that recent slaughter of “hostages”—far be it from me to excuse or extenuate—but it was no new thing in Russia. It was off the same piece with the atrocities of the French Reign of Terror and the bloody suppression of the Paris Commune of 1871; with the ruthless stamping down of Belgium under the German war machine; yes, and with the doings of “Hell-roaring” American brutality in the Philippine Island of Samar. I do not remember any surge of horror across the world over the butchery of “Red Sunday,” January 22, 1906, when before the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg the Tsar's troops, Cossacks and police killed hundreds and wounded thousands of unarmed men, women and children who had marched there peaceably to petition their “Little Father” for redress of unendurable grievances suffered at the hands of his officials.

All these things were the characteristic expressions of irresponsible despotism. The history of Russia from time immemorial is that of the training of a people in the ways of despotism; which is the same thing whether exercised by royalty, by a conquering army, or by something pleased to call itself “the proletariat.” Tyranny in any guise or under cloak of any form of highfaluting professions of pious intentions, is tyranny still, and it comes to grief sooner or later at the hands of its own pupils. In politics as in physics,

it is the law that action and reaction are equal. The pendulum swings as far one way as the other. When the pendulum is swinging, it is bad business to be standing in the middle!

SUPPOSE, again, that you had been called upon in 1796 to venture an appraisal of the extremely youthful and then still dubious political experiment known as the United States of America—ten years old. It would have been only six years since the last of the original thirteen states (Rhode Island) had ratified the Constitution—by a margin of two votes. (New York likewise had had but two votes to spare in 1788.) Probably you would have crossed your fingers, said nothing and hoped for the best. Even now, after the lapse of nearly 150 years, “it doth not yet appear what we shall be”—one hears lugubrious voices about our fundamental institutions, our courts, our experiments in legislation, our tendencies generally. How then can we judge what Russia, still within the black shadow of its barbaric past, may become, on the basis of what has been happening in these few minutes of a history whose records antedate the Christian era? Of what significance is a tenth anniversary?

Russia has great things to contribute to the world. Not only things material out of her as yet undeveloped resources; but, still more, demonstrations political and economic—perhaps of failure, of things that *cannot* be done—contributions spiritual. Not all of the brains of that great people have been blown out or starved out, or exiled, by the brutality and the mismanagement of either the old regime or the new. If this that we see were all, were the best that the Russian people can make of themselves, it would be a dismal thing—as dismal, let us say, as the government of Chicago by the choice of its free and enlightened voters is at this precious moment. We are seeing, let us say, the preliminaries leading up to “the beginning of a beginning.”

Come around again, fifty or better still a hundred years from now. I shall be otherwise occupied, to be sure, but he who sits in my place will tell you, as I tell you now, that you must keep your sense of proportion and perspective, and wait.

WITH the same sort of patience we must wait upon China. Her historic background, and the mentality it has created, are very different from those of Russia. Essential communism, in the accurate sense of the word, may be suited to the Russian psychology, but not to the Chinese, which is, within the shell of the family group, naturally individualistic. I believe that the United States, as likely to become communist as Mohammedan, will do so sooner than China. The outstanding fact about China is that it is waking up. The fact is thrilling, not to say ominous.

Thirty years ago, in Chicago, a veteran American missionary to China said to me:

“Keep your eye on China. When—there isn't any if about it, for it is beginning now—western ideas and western facilities, especially western military facilities, get into China, you will see something happen. The first thing will be that the foreigner will have to get off China's back. Probably get off in a hurry. And in the end, China will put the rest of us to bed.”

Vividly I remember that last phrase; it has been in my

mind as I watch the waking-up of the Oriental giant and see him stretch and begin to stand erect among the peoples. The cords that have bound him are snapping one by one. I think they cannot be tied again. As I write, my eye is on a dispatch announcing that the Nationalist factions have got together. Chinese in Europe last spring told me that they would. The thing that unites them is their common intention to dislodge the foreigner and destroy forever the grip upon their country which the foreigner got with guns, in the day when China had nothing but stink-pots and horrendous masks with which to frighten their enemies. To them the various military leaders represent only the corrupt power that for years has sold them out to the foreigner.

Whatever the ups-and-downs of the measurably near future, in the end there can be but one result—China for the Chinese. That outside nation will have the earliest and most comfortable dealings with them which first, best and most fully recognizes that the new day has dawned.

IT SO happened that I was in Egypt, a mere sight-seeing tourist, in the winter of 1924, and stumbled into the excitement attending the elections for the first nominally representative parliament. It was not very representative—the method of election was decidedly indirect; care had been taken to buffer the revolutionary change—but it was a big contrast with old centuries, in which the people had had no more to say about their government than had the serfs in Russia under the autocracy.

Far up the Nile our steamer was pelted with mud by men and boys running along the bank, all shouting evidently opprobrious things, among them reiterated phrases which one came to recognize.

"What are they saying?" I asked of our dragoman.

"They are crying 'Viva Zaghlul!' and 'Egypt for the Egyptians!'"

"And who is Zaghlul?"

"He is the man who to them stands for 'Egypt for the Egyptians.'"

"But we are Americans; the American flag flies over this boat. What have we to do with Egypt?"

"They do not know the flag. You are foreigners, and to them all foreigners look alike. Be careful not to leave the boat." And after a moment he added:

"Even if they knew you were Americans, they still might curse you. They believe that your President Wilson promised them liberty; yet they still feel the British foot upon Egypt's neck."

Later in Cairo I saw a great procession of children with banners; every little while they shouted. Someone read the banners for me, and in one way and another most of them said the same thing that the children were shouting—the same thing that the crowds on the banks way up the Nile had shouted:

"Egypt for the Egyptians!"

And the others said the other thing:

"Viva Zaghlul!"

Zaghlul died the other day, but the thing that he embodied and worked for lives on. I think the greatest loser by his death was England, because, radical and uncompromising as Zaghlul was from England's point of view, he was, as the Manchester Guardian has said, "the only unifying pivot," and any settlement with England to which he put his name would have been honored by most Egyptians.

Now the dealings must be with men less sure-handed, if not less honest. It is well enough to call Zaghlul "the Parnell of Egypt"; so he was; but beyond that the parallel is difficult, because it is too late in the day for England to do in Egypt what she was able to do in Ireland between the end of Parnell and the final surrender to the Irish Free State. It is an old situation, of being willing to do today things which would have been accepted gladly ten years ago but are now too late.

AN IRISHWOMAN said to me years ago a thing that ever since has been ringing in my ears:

"No man has any right in another man's country with a gun on his shoulder!"

Any time you please, back through the years since the twelfth century, Great Britain might have done, granted the wisdom and willingness, what at last she had to do in recognizing—'twas hardly granting—Ireland's right to freedom and installing her as a full-fledged member of the British Commonwealth of Nations. It would have saved a sea of blood and the slowly-dying heritage of brotherly hate.

Now Ireland is struggling into a national self-consciousness, retarded by the accumulation of ill-will, ignorance, poverty, starvation of intellectual and spiritual power, inseparable from the conditions of tyranny and exploitation under which Ireland has been living all these centuries. She is coming through very fast, in all the circumstances; but to see what Ireland may make of herself, acquiring first that vastly handicapped thing, a real sense of national unity, then gathering speed as a national entity at once confronting and cooperating with the rest of the world, we must wait, remembering that she had to start a good deal back of scratch.

NATIONALISTIC spirit may be deprecated; should be when in practical relationships it exhibits itself as mere truculent chauvinism. Bad manners obstruct fellowship, among nations as among individuals. Again, if what we are seeing now in the world marked any kind of finality, we might well be sad. But the crowned heads, who used to regulate the Neighborhood, are mostly gone, and we are in the beginning stages of self-consciousness. In Russia, after chaos succeeding oppression, is building something out of nothing; experiment without experience. In China, turmoil of internal strife accompanies determination to get a square deal among the nations. India, hardly ready for any action because so heterogeneously devoid of any common purpose, is more than stirring in sleep. The list could be made longer, but need not.

As Edward S. Martin remarks in the October Harper's, "the white races are not running so much to arrogance as they were. They show a new humility." All over the world the slogan rises dangerously: "Every country for its people!" The irresponsible rule of the sword, especially the foreign sword, is petering out, and the day of man-to-man, face-to-face relationship on the neighborhood basis, is surely at hand.

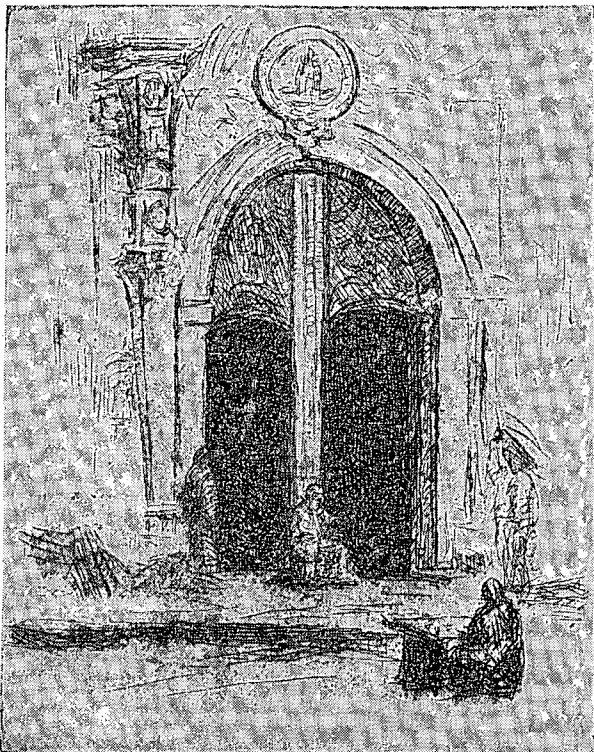
In the League Assembly, too, there was striking evidence of disposition on the part of the Little Fellows to call bluffs and brush aside ancient bunk; to demand that there be either fulfillment or an end of fine-sounding words in the mouths of those who hitherto have proudly worn the spurred boot.



A Hull-House Boy in Mexico

Etchings by

MORRIS TOPCHEVSKY



Doorway of La Santisima



Tortilla Shop