

Fetishism of the word

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A traveler and scientist who personally knew several members of Tsar Nicholas II's government, Ossendowski spent the years of the October Revolution in Russia and Siberia. Below we reprint chapter 24, parts of chapter 25, and the Conclusion of *The Shadow of the Gloomy East* (*Cień ponurego Wschodu: za kulisami życia rosyjskiego*, Warsaw 1923), translated by F. B. Czarnomski (NY: Dutton, 1925, pp. 187–190, 196–198). In January 2008, *SR* reprinted chapter 22 of the same book dealing with Witte, Stolypin, and Goremykin. Ossendowski's texts combine a keen sense of detail with an ability to generalize, and they offer a view of Soviet history based on eyewitness experience. Except for a few spelling changes nothing has been added or taken away from the text. Some of the Asian localities we have not been able to identify: their spelling was left unchanged. The "Engelhardt" mentioned in the text possibly was Vasilii Engelhardt, a scientist and historian who died during the Great War. *Ed.*

A revolution can never be contained within the frame designed for it for a given moment, but rushes on in its impetuous course. The Tsar abdicated the throne in his own and in his heir Aleksei's name. Then came those painful moments when he saw those who "worshipped" him while he was emperor turn their backs on him. The hideous spectacle of the debasement, cowardice, and vulgarity of the aristocracy caused universal disgust. Only a few persons of subaltern positions remained with the imperial family to the very end, sharing their tragic suffering until the end.

The first revolutionary government of Prince Lvov and the second government of Kerenskii's cultivated mysticism and fetishism of the word.

"And the Word became flesh," says the Scripture.

But the word of Lvov, Miliukov, Kerenskii, and of the thousands of revolutionary orators remained a word which passed without an echo. It was a pitiful picture of the impotence and wretchedness of the Russian intelligentsia.

Till at last the flesh came.

Bolshevism came, drowning the monarchists in a sea of blood, issuing new passwords founded upon the destruction of Russia.

The Commissars of the People, Dzherzhinskii, Volodarskii, and Pavlunovskii of the Cheka offered the bloody hecatomb, murdering all who believed in the great powerful Russia, in the return to the old order. Special detachments of Finns, Letts, Hungarians, Germans, and Chinese were at their disposal, and for

their protection against the efforts of "counter-revolutionaries."

Sailors of the fleet, inflamed by propaganda, hewed down their officers with axes, tore them to pieces, drowned them in the sea at Vyborg till their bodies formed dams. They broke up and robbed their ships, and sold the machinery, guns, and scrap metal on the markets in the capital and in Finland.

Blood flowed in streams, covering with a scarlet veil the "bloodless" revolution which was dreamt of and discussed at the British Embassy in Petrograd.

The new lord, Bolshevism, achieved great things during the five years, while throwing out to the civilized countries lofty slogans, bold, new words, and dazzling them with its energy, alacrity, and determination.

It conquered its enemies with the armed hand, destroyed Russia till she was laid bare, dying, imbued with blood; it changed the political configuration of Europe; on the ruins of monarchism and socialism it founded a new empire. Only its ruler needs not one crown, but five, or sixty-three. . . Full-fledged autocracy is being floated upon the sea of social-communistic slogans that remain an empty sound.

Europe, enchanted, listens to the wonderful song of words—fetishes—and does not perceive the spreading licence, disease, famine, and death, remains deaf to the cracking of human bones devoured by human beings, does not look into the caves of the Cheka, does not want to understand that everything in Bolshevism is and will remain as of old, although the scenery is changed, and sometimes the names and even the persons are changed.

Bolshevism rolls on like a ball of snow, and threatens, not only through the propagation of its slogans, but through millions of hungry, despondent men grown wild whom it can throw against the West; threatens through "awakened Asia" where the conflagration is already blazing. The flame will have abundant food: eight hundred million men who gnash their teeth and clench their fists, while treacherous Bolshevism and Communism, concealing its true face, whispers:

"Forward against the white man! Away with Christian civilization! We are on your side!"

Now they do not whisper it only; they proclaim it aloud and gravely in Tibet, India, Mongolia, and China. The Circassians, the Kalmyks, the Djungars, the Buriats and Tatars, the chieftains of the valiant Chinese Chunchuzes, sing songs of this day of revenge. I listened to the gloomy lays breathing horror in the plain of Kaidam, on the slopes of Bogdo-Ulu, in the forests of Tauan-Ola, and the waters of the Hwang Ho.

This is the aim of the hapless “great” Russian revolution, the revolution of nomads, suicides, wizards, witches, and various other fiends, and almost apocalyptic monsters. It ended in a genuine counter-revolution: Bolshevism, a movement directed against socialism, nationhood, and civilization, ultimately leading somebody, unknown as yet, to the throne of the Tsars of a new dynasty unprecedented in its autocracy.

Whom? Perhaps a new Great Mogul, Ghenghiz-Khan or Tamerlane. . . And he will be for Christian civilization an Antichrist, black or red, an antithesis of the evolution of the spirit and of progress, the first harbinger of the approaching doom of mankind.

That terrible shadow coming from the east has happened more than once before in the history of mankind, and has been always gloomy, like autumnal night, like the soul of suicide.

CHAOS

The policy of the Soviets, which was always and is still directed toward the ruin of family, church, morality, and society, has conquered. . . .

The children, corrupted by Bolshevik agents, have become their parents’ enemies. They do not see much of them, but they often serve as secret agents of the Cheka, spying upon their kin, overhearing their conversations which they report to the blood-stained judges of the Cheka and other institutions of a similar character. . . .

Terror, famine, disease, a struggle for existence baffling all imagination have demoralized the whole Russian society. The educated man has become degraded, has let himself go, has again approached the state of primitive nomad who only fights for his crumbs of bread, and is even unable to find sustenance for his own family that has broken up completely, if not physically, then certainly morally.

The workmen, allured by Soviet promises, have ceased to work and have joined the Red Army. When, later on, they wanted to return to work, they had lost the habit, lost the skill, and could not find the workshops amid the general decay, when everything fell into utter ruin. The peasant ceased to till the soil till, confronted by hunger, he was driven with his family into the towns, where he swelled the cadres of hungry men dispossessed of their class, without work, without profession, without a tomorrow, and without hope.

It was they who killed their children for food, it is their peasant women-mothers who, with their starved and enfeebled babes pressed to their bosoms, drowned themselves in the rivers. It is the declassed peasants

who form robber bands, who are as the locust migrating from east to west and from north to south in search of bread, in search of life.

CONCLUSION

Today, when I look back upon the long term of my quest across the most savage and most cultured countries of the Asiatic East, I behold clearly its gloomy shadow cast aslant over the most momentous phenomena of Russian life. I perceive distinctly the danger threatening Christian civilization from the East, but not from the real East, which endures in its mystic reverie or its hallowed majesty, defending its culture and independence against the pernicious influence of the newcomers. I perceive the menace of the East, in whose vanguard marches the Russian multitude of Mongolia half-breeds, followed by swarming hosts of utterly despondent Asiatics, burning with hatred, demoralized and revolutionized by Soviet diplomatists, with the bloodstained gold taken from the murdered, broken off the sacred images and crosses, carried away from temples of learning.

In such moments of fear of the East my mind recalls the cynical words of Engelhardt, one of the more distinguished Russian publicists, with which he depicted the coming destinies of Russia:

We are an anarchic, Tatar people, recognizing only the superiority of physical strength, of the armed force, of the mailed fist, of the whip! When we refused to pay taxes, the Government gave us spirits, made us drink everywhere, on each step, even in the streets. We paid our taxes by drinking. When we refused to be cultured people, refused to send our children to schools, the pastor denied to baptize, to marry, or to bury us, and the policeman flogged with the lash father and mother for resistance; we refused to give conscripts to the army, whereupon an officer came with a detachment and shot and bayoneted us. Then we became good citizens and patriots: we paid taxes into the Treasury of Mother Russia, we became enthusiasts for education, we went to defend Tsar, Faith, and Fatherland.

Today all has collapsed like a house of cards. We are the freest of all the peoples in the world! Now we may ourselves plunder gold, teach the bourgeois to sweep the streets or to scrub the floors, we can battle in the streets of our own cities caroling: ‘Let the three of us attack courageously yon man, for victory is good to drink after the stress of the laborious day!’

We shall exist as long as there will be anything left to be torn to pieces.

