

The Intelligentsia and the Revolution

"Russia is going under," "Russia is no more," "Memory eternal to Russia"—this is what I hear on all sides.

But before me is Russia—the Russia our great writers saw in terrifying, prophetic visions, the Petersburg that Dostoevsky saw, the Russia that Gogol compared to a racing troika.

Russia is in storm. Carlyle has said that democracy arrives "storm-girt." Russia is destined to suffer torments, abasement, divisions, but she will come out of these humiliations renewed—and great in a new way.

In the torrent of thoughts and forebodings that caught me up ten years ago there was a mixed feeling about Russia: anguish, terror, guilt, hope. Those were the years when autocracy for the last time achieved what it wanted: Witte and Durnovo¹ had tied the revolution with a rope; Stolypin wound the rope firmly around his tense, aristocratic hand. Stolypin's hand weakened. When this last nobleman was gone, the power passed to "journeymen," to use the expression of a certain high-franking personage: then the rope slackened and slid off easily, by itself.

All this took only a few years, but the few years settled on our shoulders like a long, sleepless, ghost-filled night.

Rasputin was all, Rasputin was everywhere; Azefs, unmasked and not;² and finally the years of the European carnage. For a moment it seemed that it would clear the air, or so it seemed to us who were too impressionable; in reality it proved a fitting culmination to the sham, filth, and turpitude in which our motherland wallowed.

What is the war like?
Bogs, bogs, and bogs, overgrown with grass or covered with snowdrifts; in the west, a dreary German searchlight—groping—night after night. On a sunny day a German Fokker appears; it doggedly flies along one and the same path, as if a path could be worn and befouled even in the sky. Little puffs of smoke spread out around it, white, gray, reddish (that's us

¹ P. N. Durnovo was the rigidly conservative, even reactionary, Minister of the Interior after the Revolution of 1905.—Editor.

² Evno F. Azef was the head of the terrorist Executive Committee of the Socialist Revolutionary party who was unmasked as having also been a police agent.—Editor.

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shooting at it, hardly ever hitting; like the Germans—at us). The Fokker is flustered, falters, but tries to stay on its foul little path; sometimes it methodically drops a bomb. This means that the spot it aims at has been punctured on the map by dozens of German staff officers. The bomb falls, now on a graveyard, now on a herd of cattle, now on a herd of people, but more often, of course, into a bog; that's thousands of the people's rubles in a bog.

Men gape at all this, perishing of redium, devoured by idleness; they have already managed to drag over here all the filth of their prewar apartments: adultery, cards, drinking, squabbles, scandal.

Europe has gone insane. The flower of manhood, the flower of the intelligentsia, sits for years in a bog, sits with conscious determination (isn't that symbolic?) on a narrow strip a thousand versts long, which is called "the front."

People are tiny, the earth is huge. It is nonsense that the world war is so noticeable—on a small patch of land, the edge of a wood, one clearing, there is room for hundreds of dead bodies of men and horses. And how many of them can be dumped into one not very large hole, which will soon be covered with grass or powdered over with snow! Here is one tangible reason the "great European war" is so pathetic.

It is difficult to say which is more nauseating—the bloodshed or the *illness*, the *boredom*, the *triviality*. They are called "the great war," "the war for the fatherland," "the war for the liberation of oppressed nationalities," and I forget what else. No, by *this* sign no one will be liberated.

By and by, overcome by the filth, the abomination of desolation, crushed by mad boredom and senseless idleness, people somehow dispersed, fell silent, and withdrew into themselves, as if they were sitting under glass domes from which the air was gradually being pumped out. This was when humanity really turned brutish, and the Russo-patriots in particular.

The torrent of premonitions that rushed over some of us between the two revolutions lost its force too, became muted, disappeared somewhere into the ground. I think I was not the only one to experience a sense of disease and anguish in the years from 1909 to 1916. Now, when the whole air of Europe has been changed by the Russian Revolution, begun as the "bloodless idyll" of February and irrepressibly, angrily growing, it seems at times that those recent years, so ancient and so remote, never were; and the torrent that had gone underground, flowing silent in the deep and the dark—it is sounding again, and there is a new music in its noise.

We used to love these dissonances, the roaring and ringing, the unexpected transitions—in an orchestra. But if we *truly loved* these sounds and were not merely titillating our nerves in a full concert hall after dinner, we must listen to them and love them now, when they pour from the world's orchestra, and, listening, understand that the theme is the same, still the same.

For music is not a plaything; and the cur who thought music was a plaything—let him now behave like a cur: tremble, crawl, hold on to what's his!

We Russians are living through an epoch that has few equals in grandeur. Tutchev's words come to mind:

Blessed is he who visited this world
At its most fateful moments.
He was invited by the gods
As a companion to their feast,
He's spectator of their noble drama.²

It is not the artist's job to watch how intents are fulfilled, to worry whether they are fulfilled or not. In his art the prosaic, the workaday, the transient will find expression later, when it will have burned out in life. Those of us who survive, who are not "crushed by the onslaught of the noisy whirlwind," shall become masters over countless spiritual treasures. Probably only a new genius, like Pushkin's Arion, will be able to master them fully; "tossed ashore by a wave," he will sing "the old songs" and dry "his wet garment in the sun, at the foot of a cliff."³

The artist's job, the artist's *obligation*, is to see *what* is intended, to listen to the music thundering in the "wind-torn air."⁴

Well, then, what is intended?
To make everything over. Find a way to make everything different, to change our false, filthy, boring, hideous life into a just, clean, gay, and beautiful life.

When *such* an intent, concealed since the dawn of time in the heart of man, the heart of the people, breaks its confining bonds and rushes forth in a stormy torrent, tearing down the last dams, carrying off chunks of riverbank, this is called revolution. Lesser, tamer, lowlier things are called insurrection, riot, coup d'état. But *this* is called *revolution*.

It is akin to Nature. Woe to those who expect a revolution to fulfill merely their own dreams, however high-minded and noble. A revolution, like a hurricane, like a blizzard, always brings something new and unexpected. It cruelly deceives many, it easily maims the deserving in its vortex, it often carries the undeserving unharmed to dry land; but these are details, they change neither the main direction of the torrent nor its awesome, deafening roar. The roar is still about something *grand*—always.

The sweep of the Russian Revolution, which wants to engulf the whole world (no genuine revolution can desire less; whether the wish will come true isn't ours to forecast), is such that it hopes to raise a world-wide cyclone, which will carry warm winds and the sweet scent of orange groves to snow-covered lands, moisten the sun-scorched steppes of the South with cool northern rain.

"Peace and the brotherhood of nations" is the sign under which the

² The second stanza of F. I. Tutchev's poem "Cicero."—Editor.

³ A somewhat inaccurate quotation from Pushkin's poem "Arion."—Editor.

⁴ An allusion to the last sentence of Part One of Gogol's *Dead Souls*, in which Russia is compared to an onrushing troika. The same line is more accurately quoted on p. 363.—Editor.

Russian Revolution runs its course. This is what its torrent roars. This is the music that all who have ears must hear.

Russian artists have had enough "premonitions and portents" to expect just such assignments from Russia. They never doubted that Russia was a big ship destined to journey far. Like the soul of the people that nurtured them, they were never noted for practical sense, moderation, tidiness; "all, all that threatens ruin" held for them "ineffable delights" (Pushkin).⁵ A sense of trouble, of uncertainty about the morrow, was their constant companion. To them, as to the people in its innermost dreams, it had to be *all* or *nothing*. They knew that only the best is worth thinking about, even though "hard is the good," as Plato has said.

The great Russian artists—Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy—went down into darkness, but they also had the strength to dwell and lie low in the dark, because they believed in light. They knew the light. Each of them, like the whole people that had carried them in its womb, gnashed his teeth in the dark, in despair, often in hate. But they knew that sooner or later *everything would be different*, because *life is good*.

Life is good. What has a people or a man to live for who has inwardly lost faith in everything? Or a man who is disappointed with life, exists on its "handouts," "out of charity"? Or thinks that being alive "isn't too bad" but not very pleasant either, because "everything goes its ordained way"—the way of evolution—and that people, generally speaking, are so shoddy and imperfect that the best they can expect, God willing, is to blunder through their life-span somehow, knocking together societies and states, blocking themselves off from one another with little walls of rights and obligations, conventional laws, conventional relationships.

This kind of thinking is wasteful; people who think like that might as well not live. Dying is easy. One can die quite painlessly—right now in Russia, as never before. It can even be done without a priest; no priest will humiliate you with the bribe of a funeral service.

Life is worth living only if we make boundless demands of it—all or nothing—if we expect the unexpected, if we believe not in things that "do not exist on this earth," but in those that ought to exist, no matter if they have not yet come and may not come for a long time. Life will *render* them to us—because it is *good*.

Mortal weariness is replaced by animal high spirits. After a sound sleep come fresh thoughts, washed by sleep; in the light of day they may seem *foolish*, these thoughts. But the light of day is lying.

We must understand where such thoughts flow from. Right away, now, we must realize that the Russian people is like Ivan the Simpleton, who has just tumbled out of bed, and in whose thoughts, which may seem foolish if not hostile to his older brothers, there is a tremendous creative power.

Why "*uchredilka*"?⁷ (By the way, this isn't as disparaging as it sounds:

⁵ Quotation from "Feast at the Time of the Plague."—Editor.

⁷ The derogatory nickname of the Constituent Assembly (*Uchreditel'noe Sobranie*).

the peasants are used to "*potrebilka*."⁹ Because we ourselves pontificated about "electoral agitation," criticized officials for "abusing" it; because the most civilized countries (America, France) are just now choking on electoral rigging, electoral corruption.

Because (let me speak for the simpleton) I want to "check and control" everything myself, to do everything myself, not to be "represented" (there is a great elemental strength in this—Doubling Thomas' strength); and also because sooner or later in a colonnaded hall an important official will trumpet: "Upon the thirty-ninth reading, such-and such a bill has been rejected." In that trumpet voice there will be such a dull and dreadful somnolence, such a thunderous yawn of "organized public opinion," such nameless horror, that the more sensitive, more musical among us (Russians, French, Germans—all alike) will again and again rush into "individualism," into "flight from society," into the deep and lonely night. And finally, because God alone knows whom, and how, and to what today's illiterate Russia has elected—the Russia that cannot get it through her head that the Constituent Assembly is not a tsar.

Why "Down with courts of law"? Because there are tomes of "statutes" and tomes of "interpretation"; because the judge and the lawyer,¹⁰ upper-class people both, talk between themselves about the "delict"; because the "arguments to the court" go on, over the head of a miserable little crook. The crook—well, he's a crook; he has already committed his sin, lost his soul; nothing is left but hatred or tears of repentance, escape or forced labor—anything to get out of sight. Why, on top of it all, make sport of the wretch?

A liberal lawyer has been depicted by Dostoevsky. While Dostoevsky lived he was hounded, but after his death he was called "the bard of the insulted and injured." Tolstoy, too, described the things I am talking about. And who erected a fence around that eccentric's grave? Who now vociferates that the grave might be "desecrated"? How do you know, perhaps Lev Nikolavich [Tolstoy] would be pleased to have people sit by his graveside, throw cigarette butts, and spit? Spiritle is God's, but a fence—hardly.

Why gouge holes in an ancient cathedral? Because for a hundred years a fat, belching priest took bribes and sold vodka here.

Why defile the gentry's beloved estates? Because peasant girls were raped and flogged there; if not at this squire's, then at his neighbor's.

Why the felling of century-old parks? Because for a hundred years, under the leafy lindens and maples, their owners paraded their power, taunting the beggar with their purse, the duncie with their education.

And that's how it is for everything.

I know what I'm saying. You can't get around these things. It is impossible to hush them up; yet everybody keeps silent about them.

electd in the fall of 1917, which met only once, in January 1918, and was prevented from reassembling on Lenin's orders.—Editor.

⁹ A popular term for a consumers' union (*obshchestvo potrebitel'ev*) store.—Editor.

¹⁰ Blok uses the illiterate form *abokak*, which has the derogatory implication of the American "Philadelphia lawyer."—Editor.

I do not doubt anyone's personal integrity, anyone's personal sorrow; but we are responsible for the past—or aren't we? We are links of a single chain. Don't we answer for the sins of our fathers? If this is not felt by all, it must be felt by "the best."

Do not worry. Could even a grain of the truly precious be lost? We have loved too little if we fear for the things we love. "Perfect love casteth out fear."¹⁰ Do not be alarmed when citadels, palaces, pictures, books are destroyed. They should be preserved for the people, but the people will not have lost all if it loses them. A palace that is being destroyed is no palace. A citadel that is being wiped off the face of the earth is no citadel. A tsar who has toppled off his throne by himself is no tsar. The citadels are in our hearts, the tsars in our heads. The eternal forms that have been revealed to us can be taken away only together with the heart and the head.

What did you think? That a revolution was an idyll? That creativity did not destroy anything in its path? That the people is a good little boy? That crooks, agents provocateurs, reactionaries, profiteers by the hundred would not try to grab what can be grabbed? Finally, that the age-old discord between "black" and "white" bone, between the "educated" and the "uneducated," the intelligentsia and the people, would really be so "bloodlessly" and "painlessly" resolved?

Perhaps it is you who must now be woken from "age-long sleep"? You who need to be told, "Noli tangere circulos meos"?¹¹ For you loved too little, and much is demanded of you, more than of anyone. You lacked the inner, crystalline ringing, the music of love; you insulted the artist—all right, the artist—but in him you insulted the very soul of the people. Love works wonders, music charms beasts. But you (all of us) lived without music and without love. We had better be quiet now if there is no music, if we do not hear the music. For at this time everything except music, anything devoid of music, any "dry matter" can only arouse and enrage the beast. At this stage, the human being cannot be reached without music.

Yet even the best among us say, "We are disillusioned in our people"; the best sneer and snicker, are filled with spite, see nothing around them but coarseness and beastliness (while the human being is right there). The best people even say, "There hasn't been any revolution." The ones who were obsessed with hatred of "tsarism" are ready to fling themselves back into its arms, just to be able to forget what is going on now. Yesterday's "defeatists" writing their hands over the "German tyranny." Yesterday's "internationalists" weep for "Holy Russia." Born atheists are ready to light votive candles and pray for victory over the external and the internal foe.

I don't know which is more frightening, the arson and lynchings in one camp, or this oppressive lack of musicality in the other?

Remember that I am addressing the "intelligentsia," not the "bourgeoisie." The latter never dreamt of any music except the piano. To them

¹⁰ I John 4:18.—Editor.

¹¹ "Do not touch my designs" (Archimedes).—Editor.

everything is quite simple: "Very soon our side is going to win." "order" will be restored, everything will be as before; civic duty consists in protecting one's assets and hide; the proletarians are "ruffians"; the word "comrade" is a dirty word; we've hung on to our property—and another day is gone; we might as well laugh at the fools who mean to stir up all Europe, yes, a good belly laugh, seeing that somehow we've managed a bit of profit. One cannot argue with them, because their cause is indisputable—the interests of the belly. But these are "half-enlightened" or quite "unenlightened" people; all they have ever heard is what was grunted at them at home and in school. The same grunts are expected of them:

Family: "Obey papa and mama." "Save money for your old age." "Learn to play the piano, daughter, you'll get married sooner." "Don't play with street urchins, sonny, or you'll shame your parents and tear your overcoat." *Elementary school*: "Obey the teachers and revere the principal." "Tell on bad boys." "Get better marks." "Be the first in your class." "Be willing and obliging." "Religion is the most important subject."

Secondary school: "Pushkin is our national pride." "Pushkin adored the Tsar." "Love the Tsar and the fatherland." "If you don't go to confession and communion, your parents will be called and you'll get a lower conduct mark." "Notice whether any of the boys read prohibited books." "Pretty chambermaid, mm."

University: "You are the salt of the earth." "The existence of God cannot be demonstrated." "Humanity advances on the path of progress, and Pushkin celebrated women's legs." "You are too young to take part in politics." "Give the Tsar a fig in your pocket." ¹² "Note who spoke at the meeting." *Government service*: "The internal enemy is the university student." "Not a bad-looking skirt." "You're not here to argue." "His Excellency is coming today, everybody be at your posts." "Observe Ivanov and report to me."

What can one expect of a man who conscientiously listened to all this and believed it all? But the intelligentsia are supposed to have "re-evaluated" these values? They have heard other words as well, haven't they? They have been enlightened by science, art, literature? They have drunk not only from these polluted springs but also from clear and veriginously deep springs, into which it is perilous to look, and where the water sings songs that would amaze the uninitiated!

The ground under the bourgeois' feet is as concrete as the muck under the hog's: family, money, position, medal, rank, God on his ikon, the Tsar on his throne. Pull this out from under him, and everything flies topsyturvy.

The *intelligent* has always boasted that he never had that kind of ground to stand on. His tsar can be taken away only together with his head. Skill, knowledge, methods, habits, talents are nomadic, winged possessions. We are homeless, family-less, rankless, poor—what have we to lose?

We should be ashamed to be haughty, to scoff, weep, wring our hands, moan over Russia now, when she is swept by the revolutionary cyclone.

¹² A coarse way of expressing one's scorn for someone.—Editor.

So we had been hacking away at the branch we were sitting on? A lamentable situation. With voluptuous malice we stuck firewood, shavings, dry logs into a heap of timber damp from the snows and the rains; but when the sudden flame flares up to the sky (like a banner), we run around, crying: "Oh, ah, we're on fire!"

I am not speaking of political figures whom "tactics" and "the demands of the moment" may forbid to bare their souls. I think that right now in Russia there are not a few people who rejoice in their hearts but frown out of duty.

I am speaking of those who are not engaged in politics, of writers, for instance. (If they engage in politics, they sin against themselves. "Chase two hares and you won't catch either"—they will not make policy, but they will lose their voice.) I think it is not only their right but their duty to be untactful, "tactless," ¹³ to listen to the grandiose music of the future that fills the air, without watching for single strident false notes in the august roar and ringing of the world's orchestra.

One would think a bear had stepped on the ears of the Russian intelligentsia: petty fears, pettier words. We should be ashamed to scoff at illiterate announcements or letters, written by well-meaning but unskilled hands, ashamed to meet "stupid" questions with haughty silence, ashamed of pronouncing the beautiful word "comrade" in quotation marks.

Any shopkeeper can do as much. This can only embitter the human being and arouse the beast in him.

We reap what we sow. If you think everybody is a sharper, only sharpeners will come to you. There are a few hundred crooks in plain sight—and just out of sight there are millions of human beings, as yet "unenlightened," as yet "benighted." But it is not from you that their enlightenment will come.

Among them are some who are going insane from the lynchings, cannot stomach the blood that in their ignorance they have shed; some who pound their ill-starred heads with their fists: we are stupid, we cannot understand. And there are some in whom the creative drives are still dominant; these may yet speak such words as our tired, shopworn, bookish literature has not spoken in a long time.

Proud politicking is a great sin. The longer the intelligentsia remain aloof and sarcastic, the more terror and bloodshed there may be. Dreadful and dangerous is that elastic, dry, unsavory "dogmatic dogmatics" seasoned with patronizing soulfulness. Behind the soulfulness is blood. The soul attracts blood. Only the spirit can combat horror. Why bar with soulfulness the way to spirituality? The good is hard as it is.

And the spirit is music. Socrates' daemon once ordered him to obey the spirit of music.

With your whole body, your whole heart, your whole consciousness—listen to the Revolution.

¹³ A play on the word *takt*, which means "beat" in the musical sense. Blok is implying that it is better not to have too keen an ear for music.—Editor.