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The Russian Contradiction. A Critique of the Eurasian Idea

Abstract

The argument in this article is that, despite the Eurasian dimension of Russia, the Russian soul and the Russian Idea are fundamentally European. This might come as counter-intuitive given the Slavophile rejection of Westernization or of what Spengler calls the *Western pseudo-morphosis* (the forcing of the Russian soul into alien Western forms). But our argument is that they wrongly take for `genuine Russian` the hybrid Eurasian synthesis resulting from centuries of Asian domination. Defending the Eurasian despotic Empire they are defending the first falsification of Russia which we call the *Mongol pseudo-morphosis*. We take as genuine Russian more the Kievan Russia, the idea of Holy Russia and less the autocratic Asian despotism built under the influence of the Mongols. As such, the *Raskol* reflects the inner European religious soul of Russia standing against Cezarian subjection and falsification of the Church. We therefore argue that defenders of the Eurasian idea of Russia are rather detrimental to the original Russian idea.

Introductory note:

The first thing to state is that our analysis is grounded on both admiration for Russian culture and skepticism for Russian politics. This not only formulates the problem but anticipates the answer as well.

1. Why Russia?

We are not interested in the historical mission of the Eskimo (to quote Vladimir Solovyov). But Russia's *sheer quantity* invested it with an outstanding *quality*. Its giant proportion raised it to the status of a majestic *Weltmacht*. This renders the Russian idea fundamental to the problem of *Weltgeschichte* itself. Russia lies before us sublime, fascinating and threatening. Great movements of small nations do not impact universal history. But an imperceptible movement of a giant affects the sum total of the world. This is why Russia *matters*. What alters Russia will ultimately alter the world itself. This is therefore no minor thing: on the contrary, this is big...

2. Understanding Russia requires understanding the Russian Idea

It is ironic that G.W.F. Hegel -the greatest philosopher of history- didn't perceive Russia's massive potential energy. This is why, for him, Russia does not fill any substantial place in the march of universal history. It falls in the lot of the "unhistorical", as a mere connection with Asia.

"First, the northern slope, Siberia, must be eliminated. This slope, from the Altai chain, with its fine streams, that pour their waters into the northern Ocean, does not at all concern us here; because the Northern Zone, as already stated, lies out of the pale of History (G.W.F. Hegel, p. 118)

Nothing happens in Siberia, he said – just a little time before Dostoyevsky will be serving prison time for conspiring against the *Tsarist status quo*. The invisible restlessness of this *negative* will end up marching in Berlin as a proof that something *happened* in Siberia (Feodor Dostoyevsky-*Notes from the Underground*). The Berlin philosopher would never have thought that Russia would get that "*historical*" as to lead a revolution and to engage into a world war that would achieve to completely alter universal history. In other words Hegel did not see (this once) the inner content, but only the external surface. He somehow assimilated Russia to *Asian non-historicity* and contemplated no potential in the future of Russia. He didn't perceive the *subterranean demons* striving to capture and possess the Russian soul (forming the pre-history of the apocalyptic XXth century). The opposite is true for America, however, where he envisages a great potential of extreme freedom that will come to take lead of history.

I would argue that the reason for this "hole" in the system is that Hegel associates *history* with *idea*. A nation creates history only in so far as it serves and realizes an idea or, as he put it, provides "a definition of the Absolute". This means that what Hegel really lacked - in order to genuinely understand Russia - was a *definite idea of the Russian idea*. But how can we get a definite idea of something that indefinite as Russia? It is our purpose to answer this question.

3. What is Russia?

It is not clear what Russia is. Russia is not *clear* and *distinct*. It is our contention that the resolution of the Russian mystery amounts to the resolution of the Russian idea. But this is no easier. Most of the history of Russian philosophy occupied itself with precisely this problem.

The question "What is Russia?" and what its reason to exist is have dominated the debate of the emerging Russian *intelligentsia*. Vladimir Solovyov distinguishes three stages in the effort to answer the question of the Russian "manifest destiny". The question concerning the *purpose* is the question concerning the `essence` of something.

1. First, Russia's problem was the creation of a national monarchy. This has been accomplished with the unification of Ukraine and White Russia under Moscow whereby the Tsar became a Tsar of all *Rus*. But once the state was built, what was its role?
2. Peter the Great gives the first answer: the `barbarian` Russia must educate itself at the school of Western civilization. But once civilized, the question again arose: what was its calling? Or, in plain German: *Wozu?*
3. Some said that the role of the State is to secure power and wealth. Solovyov argues however that great nations are precisely the one overcoming the daily bread in view of creating something great for the whole of humanity. (Vladimir Solovyov, 1948)

Vladimir Solovyov ends up concluding that the Russian idea is not what some people think of Russia but is *the idea that God had of Russia when He created it*. (Tomas Špidlík, 1994). With this, he touches a metaphysical notion of *vocation* and formulates in a sophisticated Platonic manner the primary intuition the Kievan Russians had when they first converted during Prince Vladimir: the neophyte ardor was aware of the gift of a *calling* as well as of the responsibility of the *mission* (Alexander Soloviev, 1959). This mission is what *Russian messianism* describes: to Christianize the nation and the state, which means that the rulers should be the very image of God on earth serving justice and peace on earth, defending the powerless, defending the people inside against the frequent raids of the pagans outside –Russia was then on the border of Asia, albeit not yet Eurasian. We must understand this *primal identity* of the Russian soul in order to grasp how this was later affected and distorted by centuries of Asian domination.

“The Russian soul grew together with Christianity in a stronger bond (...) The period of Tatar domination deepened the Christian consciousness of Russia (...) She is a chosen country, the fruit of five centuries of Christianity. And it seemed that her state structure approximated the ideal (...) The preservation of true piety enhanced –in the eyes of Russian people – the providential mission of Russia and her ruler” (Alexander Soloviev, 1959).

The first consequence of the Tatar yoke was that *the Russian soul practically fused with Christianity to the point this emerged as the very Russian idea*. The sufferance of oppression induced the profound inwardization of the original spirit of *Holy Russia* - a notion significantly prior to the Muscovite Russia's idea of *A Third Rome*. The Third Rome is actually nothing than Holy Russia later invested with a universal crusade mission once the Orthodox Byzantine Empire fell apart. The point to grasp however is the fundamental difference between Kievan Russia (as European-style principality) and Muscovite Russia (as Eurasian empire). The second consequence of the Tatar yoke was *the emergence of a despotic state*, mirroring Asian despotism as the only possible manner of emancipating Russians from the Mongol cruel oppression. This Asian despotic state arose therefore of the *Ausnahmezustand* of the Tatar yoke but was *pepetuated* as a sort of new “social contract” enforced upon people who traded their freedom for security. The significant point in the emergence of this Eurasian structure is mostly the reign of Ivan the Terrible. Our stand is that the original European Russian soul was thereby alienated and forced into a

double contradiction resulting from what we call the *Mongol pseudo-morphosis* (by paraphrasing as well as criticizing Spengler's approach on the Russian soul).

4. Russia is a Double Contradiction

We are inspired to read Russian history in a dialectical manner, according to Hegel. Except we cannot stress in this case the rational resolution of contradictions, but rather their movement, the inner scission and its dialectical restlessness. The Russian mystery can therefore be divided into two contradictions – the resolution of which it permanently but unsuccessfully strives to achieve.

a) Russia's Geopolitical Contradiction

Russia came to be a Eurasian empire. This is a two-headed world dominated by two principles. How is that to be understood? It is culturally clear that Germany is of European substance while China is of Asian substance. Russia, on the other side, is *antinomian*. It seems to be European and Asian alike. It is a colossal space encompassing both European and Asian landmass. This however is difficult to grasp and remains an abstract notion unless we do not further determine it. As has already been remarked, either Russia represents Europe in Asia, or it will represent Asia in Europe. Fusing both is difficult to imagine, at least difficult as totally separating them.

The origin of this can be traced to the moment where Ivan the Terrible defeats the *Kazan Khanate* (successor of the Mongol Empire) which was somehow the very *limit* –physical as well as symbolical- between Europe and Asia. With this, Russia crosses both Volga and the Urals (the physical Eurasian barrier). This was not mere geographical frontier, but a cultural one as well since it separated two different superstructures - the sedentary European society and the nomadic Asian one. With this Russia neutralized the permanent migratory attacks. In conquering the limit between Europa and Asia, *it overcame this limit becoming a Trans-Uralic Eurasian empire* (Ivan's imperial title cumulated the Russian and Mongol crowns). The only similar construction in history was the heroic but ephemeral Eurasian empire of Alexander the Great.

But this victory is precisely where the future problem of Russia comes from. It is clear that Russia began to build its Empire in self-defense, striving to neutralize the matrix of continual nomad raids. As such its Empire inherited the Mongol title and mandate, but also *the state structure* - which is, it inherited... Asia. But as an original local and European power, Russia needed to transmute into a global and Asian power in order to be able to administer the colossal Empire. And this unavoidably led to *Asian despotism*. The only way it could achieve emancipation from Asia was to become more like Asia. Russia became a military state, centralized and despotic in order to amass all energies into the war effort. It is clear that the European factor in this *mon-*

strous Eurasian synthesis was the active one, while the Asian factor was the passive one. To this day, while 80% of Russia's landmass is Asian, only 20% of its population is in Asia – and while only 20% of its landmass is European, 80% of its population lives in Europe. But our point is that the very fact of uniting the continents forced Russia into subjecting both its European side and its Asian side *to the Asian autocratic form of power*. This means that the contradiction of Europe and Asia was reconciled in an Asian manner.

It is significant, in this respect that the Slavophiles (supposed to be the guardians of genuine Russian soul), as well as contemporary adepts of the Eurasian vision (such as Dugin) stress the positive function of the Mongol factor in shaping the idea and form of the Russian state.

In our view this is nevertheless the primary point in the *falsification* of the more original Russian identity already given in the Kievan Russia. The idea of Holy Russia implied the Christianization of the Government, morality of the power, the protection of the oppressed. But this could not be achieved anymore once the State assumed a different mission, to become the *Third Rome* and combat Asian pagan invaders by means of a military, autocratic, centralized and ultimately oppressive state. We do not take this as a mere criticism, but we try to understand the inner tragic necessity behind the alienation of the Holy Russia into a Third Rome, of a European principality into a Eurasian empire. Setting aside the sacrifices this imposed primarily on the Russian nation, there are also significant positive outcomes of this – protecting Europe from further Mongol invasions and the emancipation of Eastern European nations from the Ottoman yoke as well. This does not, however, eliminate the problem we identify in the emergence of the Eurasian contradiction within the Russian soul, affecting, once again, Russian simple people mostly sacrificed in order to sustain the imperial superstructure.

This also means, however, that Slavophiles and Eurasian supporters are not actually defending the genuine `pure` Russian soul, but the hybrid end product of centuries of Asian domination. This domination resulted on the one side into a *purification of spiritual Russia* (within monastic reclusion) and on the other side into a *mongolization of political Russia* (an increasing autocratic rule inspired by Asian despotism). As such we argue the counter-intuitive idea that *Slavophiles do not stand for the authentic Russian soul, but for a semi-alienated form of Russian history* in so far as the European Russian theological content was *hybridized* with the Asian Mongol political form.

The resolution of the external contradiction (of the Russian principle with the Mongol principle) succeeded by the assimilation of the Mongol principle, that is through the creation of the despotic Asian state). This entailed the forced resolution of the internal contradiction (of the State with the Church, and the Tsar with the boyars) resulting in an autocratic regime precisely when European nations were slowly advancing towards more freedom.

Russia's Eurasian drama is that precisely Ivan the Terrible, the one who emancipated the Russians from the Mongols is the one who destroyed the independence of the Church, of the nobles

and of the peasants by concentrating absolute power in the form of Asian despotism. Otherwise put: *Russia's emancipation was only accomplished through its utter enslavement.*

This brings us to a deeper contradiction of Russia.

b) Russia's Theo-political Contradiction

The Eurasian geopolitical contradiction of Russia lies upon a deeper theological-political contradiction. Russia is, essentially, a nation with a *European religion* and an *Asian state*. It is a combination of eschatological religion with a reactionary state, a combination of explosive emancipatory messianic theology with a retrogressive self-conservative state.

Although Russia inherited the theocratic Byzantine ideal of the `symphony of powers`, it is true that in fact the Church came to be progressively overwhelmed by the State – which again is an expression of *Oriental theocracy* (as Hegel defined this, as subordination of the sacred to the profane power or the sacralization of power and the state itself) - in utter opposition with the European ideal where the *ecclesial monarchy* maintained over centuries its independence from the *imperial monarchy*. This meant that the *ideology of the Holy Russia* (which was originally a Christian messianic idea of bringing justice upon the earth) came to realize itself as *the ideology of the Third Rome* through a glorification of state power in the crudest Asian theocratic manner.

This is why we oppose Oswald Spengler's interpretation of Russia. He only justifies the Slavophil standpoint that Russian autocracy expresses the genuine Russian Soul, while Peter the Great is a mere traitor (the same point currently made by contemporary Eurasian ideologues). We believe the authentic Russian soul must be identified prior to the *Mongol pseudo-morphosis of Russia*.

Dostoyevsky accused Peter the Great of falsifying and betraying the Russian soul and he opposed the artificial-alien Sankt Petersburg to the authentic Moscow spirit). But what he denounces as the "Petrine falsification of Russia" only comes after the original falsification of Russia by the Mongols. While claiming they are fighting the "Western pseudo-morphosis" (Spengler) they are actually standing for the first alienation of the Russian soul, the one induced by the Mongol yoke that resulted in the *Eurasian falsification of the primal apocalyptic Holy Russia*.

At this point, we believe, the *European genuine inner principle of the Russian soul* reacted against the Eurasian hybrid synthesis of the State with the Church. We view the *Raskol (old-believers) movement* as precisely a `Protestant` rejection of the distortion of the Russian soul into an Oriental theocracy of Eurasian nature. Of course, on the surface the protest of the `old believers` seems superstitious, since they resisted the `modernization` of the cult and are presented as backward religious reactionaries. But Berdyaev makes the case that the profound genesis of the *Raskol* movement was in fact due to the complete deception with the "Third Rome" ideology legitimizing the Muscovite autocracy and its falsification of the Church itself (Nikolai Berdyaev, 1959). We interpret this religious movement of protest as *the revolt of European spiritual free-*

dom against the Asian-style “Babylonian captivity of the Church” by the Eurasian State. This was the dialectical European eschatological counterpart to the Asian theocratic subjection of the Church. It is not so much that they resisted `modernization` as that they resisted the State interference within the Church – this is what makes *Raskol* the dialectical expression of the European principle of freedom. Historically, this movement is the source of the outstanding tradition of *Russian freedom*: the disappointment concerning the neutralization of spiritual freedom by the political autocracy. The modern *intelligentsia* is mostly secularized *Raskol*.

Even Peter the Great – normally associated with Westernization – fortified the absolutist principle of the State while subjecting the Church and spiritual freedom even more to the autocratic Government. That is why, despite his gigantic modernization of Russian infrastructure, he actually maintained and enforced the Eurasian arrangement of subjecting the sacred to the profane – which was unthinkable in either Catholic Europe or Protestant Europe.

This is why defending the *Eurasian synthesis* requires a permanent sacrifice of the most genuine religious soul of Russia – a permanent sacrifice of Seraphim of Sarov (a sort of Russian Francis of Assisi) on the altar of Ivan the Terrible, a permanent sacrifice of theology on the altar of politics.

This Eurasian structure has also ultimately led the *intelligentsia* to reject both State and Church since the religious essence of European freedom ceased to find its place in the Eurasian synthesis of State and Church.

Despite its tragic necessity, the Eurasian synthesis of a European religious soul with an Asian political body ultimately worked *to the complete discredit of the idea of a Third Rome and to the establishment of its infernal caricature, the Third International.* The Eurasian form of power is also the reason why Communism succeeded in Russia. While Europe was the realization of freedom in a variety of intermediate bodies, Russia was already a state of giant proportions with virtually no social and moral counter power. This has made it all too easy for the Revolution to simply take over the Asian despotic state and to fashion it as Modern totalitarian state.

Conclusions

Understanding Russia requires the understanding of the Russian idea. Our contribution was to expose the Russian idea as a double-contradiction, which accounts for the dialectical history of Russia. We have tried to first understand the tragic necessity by which Russia became a Eurasian geopolitical giant. Then we drew attention on the theological-political contradiction at work within this Eurasian bloc.

Our main arguments against this synthesis can be resumed by pointing that more freedom and less autocratic government render justice to a more original and deeper form of the Russian soul. Defending or stressing the Eurasian dimension do not amount to *a purification of Russia* from Western *pseudo-morphic* influences, but to a preservation of elements in the Asian pseudo-morphosis that are not intrinsically Russian but rather compromised the original pure ideal of the

Holy Russia. This must not nevertheless be taken to say that *everything* the contemporary Western civilization has to offer is automatically recommended. Quite the contrary, the European modern civilization also contributed the Jacobin Terror, the Communist and the Fascist totalitarianism as well as contemporary forms of thought-control – pathologies themselves of the self-contradictory exercise of freedom itself. Our argument rather points to Dostoyevsky's *Legend of the Grand Inquisitor* – which is makes *the purest `European` and `Christian` argument against both Asian pre-modern despotism or European modern totalitarianism*. But this is a different level of a more complicated debate.

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