You Cannot Fathom Russia with Your Mind

by Theodore Dalrymple (April 2014)

From the point of view of complete rationalists, who think that life can be lived wholly according to a rational plan, anniversaries are odd. Why should the memory of an event be more prominent in our minds at one moment or on one date rather than another? And if we are going to have anniversaries, why should the hundredth be more important than, say, the ninety-third or the eighty-seventh? Surely, if an event was historically important, it was equally important for all the time that succeeded it? The importance given to centenaries is a relic of magical thinking. Why not celebrate or confer equal importance on the dozenth or the twelve dozenth anniversary?

However, Man does not live by rationality alone, and we must sometimes take him as he is. Indeed, we must occasionally be like him ourselves; and I doubt that there are many among us who are completely unaffected or unimpressed by the hundredth anniversary of some event we consider important. Is there anyone alive who really *feels*, as against *thinks*, that a hundredth birthday has no more allure than, say, a forty-eighth?

This year, then, it is inevitable that we shall be subjected to a lot of memorialisation of the centenary of the outbreak of the Great War. There will be historiographical battles over the meaning of that most catastrophic of all wars that ushered in the age of genocide and political mass-murder. Did it have any moral purpose whatever, was it any one power's fault more than another's? Was it the war to end all wars, to make the world safe for democracy, or was it merely a sordid struggle for hegemony in Europe and in the world? Or was it a Greek tragedy?

Fashions change in attitudes as surely as in dress, perhaps in an even more fickle way. Revulsion against the pointlessness of the slaughter was by no means immediate, at least in France and Britain. On the contrary, patriotic pride in the sacrifice and victory was the predominant response; disillusionment set in only ten years or more later, and much more among the intellectuals than among the general population, which continued to attend ceremonies at war memorials as if the war had been for a sacred cause and was not a mere disaster brought about by the arrogance and incompetence of the political class of the time. The famous war, or rather anti-war, poetry was in the great minority by comparison with the versification or

doggerel of thousands of patriotic poetasters.

The spread of anti-war sentiment, the feeling that all the death and destruction had been in vain, that the war (and therefore, by extension, war itself) solved no problems, was, paradoxically, one of the causes of the Second World War, for it was the soil in which support for the appeasement of Hitler grew; and appeasement made the war, when it finally came, far worse than it would have been only a few years earlier. If history teaches anything, it is not that no one learns anything from history, it is rather that people learn the wrong lessons from history.

Some historians treat the war as if it were the bursting of an abscess that had been gathering in the previous decades which were seemingly those of peace, plenty, progress and prosperity. But what is obvious in retrospect is often not obvious in prospect. Certainly no one had much idea of what kind of war it would be if war came. But many did not even suspect that war was coming, let alone what kind of war it would be.

It is instructive, then, to read books written just before the war broke out by intelligent authors with no special faculty of foresight, none greater than the ordinary or than ours would have been. To read only the far-sighted is to fail to appreciate their far-sightedness. We must read the ordinary to appreciate our own limitations.

When, therefore, I came across a handsome book written in 1913 by a man called Hugh Stewart with the title *Provincial Russia*, I bought it and read it. After all, a cataclysm of world-shaking proportions in Russia was only four years away from the publication of the book: what inkling did the author of book have of that?

The answer is ‘None whatever.’ This is not because the author was a stupid man, very far from it. Born in 1884, he was a classical scholar of note who had an interesting, adventurous and tragic life. Having obtained a good degree in Classics at Cambridge, he went as a teacher to Tsarist Russia, where he learned to speak Russian fluently. He then had an academic career, becoming Professor of Classics at Canterbury College in New Zealand at a very early age. He was an accomplished mountaineer. He joined up to the New Zealand Expeditionary Force at the outbreak of the Great War, was seriously wounded at Gallipoli, promoted to colonel and highly decorated. After the war he resumed his academic career, returning a few years later to England as Professor of Classics at Leeds university and then as principal of University College, Nottingham (D. H. Lawrence’s alma mater). He died suddenly at sea, aged 54, on his way back from New Zealand where he had been on holiday.

His first wife died in 1920, two weeks after giving birth to their son. His second wife died

in 1928, while giving birth to a stillborn son. He himself died only four years after his third marriage, having by then had a son and a daughter. Such a story reminds us how fragile was the human hold on life only a couple of generations ago.

And indeed Stewart's short but handsome book has medical details that are of interest to me as a reminder of how recently-won has been our current state of (medical) enlightenment – other forms of enlightenment being another question altogether. My grandfather came from a region, White Russia, where, twenty years after he left it, 'Illnesses are signs of the Devil's forces.' The beliefs of the locals are picturesque and in a way charming, but not very medically effective:

> *The fever that haunts the dwellers is an ugly old woman who creeps up to the sleeper and kisses him, and will not part from him. But then, she may be tricked in various ways. Once a sick man expecting her visit pretended to be dead. He lay down under the ikons and bade his relatives weep for him. When the fever came and saw them weeping, she believed him dead, and went away. You may also frighten her, for instance, by firing a gun over the invalid, for she is a great coward.*

However, the medical credulity of the highly-educated author was not much less than that of the White Russian peasants. This is what he has to say about the Crimea and its healing mud:

> *The mud consists largely of vegetable matter, whose peculiar chemical qualities make it efficacious for the treatment of such diseases as scrofula, gout, or tuberculosis. This cure was employed by the Tartars, who dug a hole in the dried bottom of the lake into which they put the invalid, covering him except for the head with the freshly exposed mud. The method followed at the present day is essentially the same. The invalid is sunk into his mud bath and left for about twenty minutes with an umbrella sheltering his head from the hot sun. Then he is washed with warm water and carried back to his room, where he sweats in pools and will drink as much as ten tumblers of thin lemon-flavoured tea.*

The invalids of whom the author is talking are the cream of Russian society, highly educated and cosmopolitan. Before we laugh too loud at such pitiful ignorance even of the best-educated, perhaps we should try to imagine what remedies we should be prepared to try ourselves if we were attacked by a slow wasting disease for which there was no indubitably effective or scientifically proven treatment.

Provincial Russia is not a political book, a fact which is itself very revealing. Politics,

where touched upon at all, are mentioned *en passant*, not as being the main interest or purpose of life. By contrast, no book about Russia published after 1917 could be other than political, obsessively so. Every author took a political stand, for or against. The landscape disappeared from view. The Revolution politicised existence itself.

In Stewart's book, the landscape is still important. He quotes physical descriptions of it by Gogol, Aksakov and Chekhov. The customs and beliefs of the peasantry are more important to him than their economic arrangements or the politics of the land question. The autocracy is not mentioned once. The many pictures that accompany the text are by an artist called Frédéric de Haenen (1857 – 1928) are folkloric, even those that depict a convoy of prisoners, not necessarily political, heading for Siberia. The hunt for an escaped prisoner is indistinguishable in spirit from the hunt for a bear, and is almost a form of sport. The peasants in the pictures are often shown dancing, but not in the way they are shown dancing once the Soviet propaganda state had been established: there is no implication here that they dance because they are so happy with the political and economic state of affairs.

There is no sense of impending doom or catastrophe in the book, no intimation that a regime is soon to be established in the country that will regularly kill more people in a day than its predecessor in a century. On the contrary, if anything the march of progress, of ever-increasing wealth, education and enlightenment is taken for granted, as being more or less inevitable and unstoppable. Little did the author guess that it would take many years for Russia once again to reach the level of production of the year of publication of his book.

I do not wish to ridicule the author when I say that in his pages appeared one of the least prescient prognostications I have ever seen in print. Here is the passage:

> *Since the emancipation [of the peasants in 1861] the peasants have made immense progress. And now the rate of improvement can only accelerate with the influence of education, the breaking up of the commune, which was a heavy drag on rural enterprise, the political franchise, and the increased facilities offered by the spread of railways for disposing of surplus crops and developing the internal resources of the country. A great future assuredly lies before this remarkable people, with its physical and mental powers, it vigour, elasticity and youth. This may be a question of time, but it can scarcely be a matter for doubt.*

I do not need to point out the inaccuracy of this prediction, unless being the victim of one of the greatest and most vicious political experiments in history be counted 'a great future' for a people. Yet the author is not a fool, quite the reverse; he is not a liar; he is not

blind; he is not ill-intentioned; he is not blinded by ideology. By all accounts he learnt the language of the country very well, sufficiently well to be able to describe the variation of its dialects with authority; he travelled extensively within the Empire. He was well-versed in Russia's literature and history. Nor were these his only qualifications or accomplishments; as a classicist he was acquainted with historical precedent and the fate of empires.

He made the cardinal mistake of confusing a projection with a prediction. It is a mistake that I doubt many of us have altogether avoided in our lives. He thought that because immense progress had been made in the recent past in Russia it would continue indefinitely into the future, along the same line of the graph as it were. He was like the man who thinks that because he has driven safely at 150 miles an hour for a hundred miles, he can continue at that speed without danger.

The prescient man is not the man who knows most. He is like the chess-player who takes in the situation on a board at once, the result of much study and the possession of instinct. The man who has not studied is blinded by prejudice; the man who has studied, but has no instinct, is blinded by learning.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is *here*.