

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION.

By MR. G. DE WESSELITSKY.

Read before a Meeting of the Sociological Society, at the School of Economics and Political Science (University of London), Clare Market, W.C., on December 20th, 1905, the Right Hon. LORD REAY in the Chair.

The clearest result of the Russian Revolution is the end of Absolutism. Autocracy has accomplished its mission and been replaced by Constitutional Monarchy, which is the legal form of the Government of Russia at present. Efforts to restore Autocracy are as subversive of the lawful order of things there as those tending to establish a Republic.

Autocracy has been one of the historical forms of the evolution of the Russian Government, but by no means a primordial or a permanent and undisputed one. Greek and Roman historians were astonished at the Slavs not living under chiefs, but governing themselves. And the dawn of Russian history shows us two democratic institutions—the *Mir*, assembly of family heads in villages, and the *Vetche*, assembly of citizens in towns. The latter was destroyed in the XV. century. The former exists now as of yore; neither the most despotic ruler nor the most daring revolutionary ever attempted to suppress it. Those institutions, however, though well responding to Rousseau's ideal of pure democracy, failed to procure for the people outward security and inward order—and hence an appeal to princes from abroad.

The first six centuries of Russian history (IX.-XV.)* are filled with struggles between native democracies and the imported dynasty. The Princes of the house of Rurik, deriving their authority, not from conquest, but from the people's will, were appointed as military commanders and magistrates by the *Vetches*, and often dismissed by these. In the course of time, the Princes' authority took root more firmly in the south and in the east, while the whole north became quite republican. The largest of the Russian Republics, that of Novgorod,† had a territory three times as large as France, and lasted two centuries longer than the Roman Republic. The Princes brought with them a new institution, their council, composed of the heads of their following, subsequently joined by the elders of their principality. In the XIV. century, the Tartar Khan Yedigher reproaches Grand Duke Basil I., of Moscow, with having broken a treaty by his own decision, without consulting the best men of his country, as he ought to have done according to ancient Russian custom.

The next two centuries (XV.-XVII.)‡ were those of the Moscow Tsars, who, though claiming absolute power, were in reality limited by an aristocracy whose power was based, not on territorial possessions, but on connections of family and patronage. The Tsar's permanent Council, the *Boyarskaia Douma*, was composed of *Boyars* (Lords), appointed by the Tsar, yet upholding on the whole their family and class interests. It was chiefly as a support against them, as well as against foreign enemies, that the Tsars began, in the XVI. century, to summon the *Zemsky Sabor* (National Assembly), containing representatives of the Noblesse,§ the Clergy, and the Merchants. These *Sabors*

* From the appeal to Rurik by Novgorod, 862, to the repudiation of the Tartar Suzerainty by Ivan III., 1480.

† The two others were Pskov and Kbhynov, now Viatka.

‡ From the rejection of the Tartar yoke, 1480, to the foundation of St. Petersburg, and the completion of the Reform by Peter the Great, 1702.

§ The precedence given in Russia to the Noblesse over the Clergy, maintained in the modern Russian Code, has no parallel amongst European nations, and had only one amongst the Asiatic, in ancient Assyria.

were generally convened in all grave emergencies of the State, and their concurrence was asked for imposing new taxes and establishing new laws. In cases of interruption to a regular succession to the Throne, the *Zemsky Sabor* had to elect a new occupant of it. The *Sabors* of the XVI. century had mostly a consultative voice, but in the beginning of the XVII., during the Epoch of Troubles and the Interregnum it brought about, the *Sabor* became the chief governing and legislative as well as the constituent power of the Tsardom. Its greatest historical act was the election of Tsar Michel and the foundation of the Romanov dynasty.* During the whole of Michel's reign, and the greater part of that of Alexis, the Sabors met almost yearly, were truly representative of the people, and had a large share in legislation and government.† It was only after the Tsarish power had been consolidated that (1661) Tsar Alexis refused to convene the *Zemsky Sabor* demanded by the Estates. It was in the same year that Louis XIV. assumed personal rule in France. Representatives of the Noblesse, with or without those of the Clergy, continued to be summoned for special purposes, chiefly for helping to frame new laws. Three such incomplete Sabors sat in Peter the Great's minority, one of which elected his brother John and himself Tsars; a fourth representative assembly was summoned by Peter for judging his sister Sophia.

The two last centuries (XVIII.-XIX.), from the foundation of St. Petersburg, 1702, to the Manifesto granting the

* It is generally admitted that, during the Interregnum, the *Zemsky Sabor* exercised all the rights of Sovereignty, which then lay entirely in the Nation. Some writers pretend that the *Sabor*, acting on behalf of the Nation, transferred all those rights to the Tsar it elected. Others believe that by a special deed, *Zapis*, Tsar Michel promised to reign in accordance with the national will. Such a *Zapis* was given by Boris Godounov on his election by the *Zemsky Sabor* in 1598, and another by Vassily Shouisky, elected by the Moscow Provincial *Sabor* in 1606. Prince Wladyslaw of Poland subscribed a list of conditions, framed by the *Boiarskaia Douma*, in order to be elected Tsar of Russia. It seems probable that some agreement was made with the first Romanov Tsar. The idea of a covenant between the Sovereign and the People was deeply rooted in the national conscience of Russia of the XVII. century, and it reappears in the XVIII. at the election of Anna Ioanovna.

† There were seventeen full *Zemsky Sabors*:—1550, 1566, 1584, 1598, 1612, 1613-1615, 1619, 1621-1622, 1632-1634, 1637, 1642, 1645, 1648, 1650, 1651, 1653.

constitution, October 30th, 1905, form the purely Autocratic period, though hardly any reign passed without some effort on the part of the rulers or of the ruled to limit absolute power by a national representation. That period is naturally divided into three sections. The first, from Peter the Great to Nicholas I., is that of Progressive Autocracy. After destroying the Muscovite aristocracy, Peter opened all careers to talent and energy, foreign as well as native. From all countries there poured into the new Empire a stream of strong personalities which was met by another of the same kind from Russians themselves rising from the lowest ranks of life. I never realised that heroic epoch of the Autocracy so vividly as in visiting the Loan Exhibition of Russian Historical Portraits in St. Petersburg last summer, held in the famous Taurida Palace, built by Potiomkin and now accommodated for the first Russian Parliament. What Titanic figures one saw there, of overflowing vitality, boundless energy, reckless daring, apt to become, after a short apprenticeship, victorious generals, successful diplomatists or enlightened statesmen, and equally ready to devote themselves to a strong ruler or to overthrow a weak one. They fought for power—eight palace and military revolutions bear evidence of it.

The drawback was in the unprotected state of the people, arbitrarily governed by those brilliant improvised rulers and their following. The shrewdest among these saw the necessity of reviving under some shape the old representative institutions. Peter the Great himself, who seems to have regarded the Autocracy as a national dictatorship for progress and expansion, provided by a law that two representatives of the Noblesse of each province should be elected into the Senate, the supreme legislative, judicial and governing body, destined to maintain order and justice. That law, never applied, yet never abolished, was much discussed by the reformers of the sixties who wished to make it the starting point of a constitution. However, one principle of the Moscow period still obtained in St. Petersburg, *viz.*, that the making of new laws needed the co-operation of some

representative body.* On the demise of Peter II., 1730, Anna Ioannovna was elected Empress on the condition of accepting a constitution greatly limiting the Autocracy. That constitution, unpopular with the majority of the Noblesse, was soon abolished, but in 1762 Empress Catherine placed herself at the head of a reform movement against Peter III. And after being made by it the ruler of Russia, she redeemed her pledges by summoning to Moscow, 1767, under the name of a Commission for the elaboration of a code of laws, a virtual Zemsky Sabor, in which even the free peasants and the Cossacks were represented.† The Russian National Assembly was thus convened 22 years before the French one, and the instructions given by the Russian electors to their representatives, compare not unfavourably with similar instructions given to French deputies in 1789. The difference in the result is best accounted for by the absence in the Russia of then of the middle class which ensured the introduction of the constitutional government in France. The members of the Assembly of 1767-1768‡ did, however, remarkably good work; and they demanded a permanent national representation. Catherine graciously thanked them for their labours and never summoned it or any other representation again. Yet she made use of several laws elaborated by that Assembly, and granted provincial self-government to the Noblesse and a municipal one to large towns.

During Emperor Paul's reign reformers were grouped round the Crown Prince Alexander, who on ascending the throne as Alexander I., immediately began to draft a very liberal constitution. Napoleonic wars diverted him from that purpose, but he granted a constitution to Finland and another to Poland, with a view of extending the same

* A "Deputation" of the Noblesse met 1728, another "Deputation of the Three Estates, a Sabor in composition though not in name or power, was summoned 1730, and a third one, of the Noblesse only, sat 1761-63."

† Catherine's Voltaire-ianism made her exclude the Clergy.

‡ It sat almost two years and was "prorogued" December, 1768, "on account of the war with Turkey." The Douma, which met in April, 1906, was the first Russian National Representation after the lapse of 138 years.

institutions to Russia proper. A comprehensive constitution was worked out by the great lawyer Speransky towards the end of Alexander I.'s reign. Unfortunately, he was then already won over to the Holy Alliance of absolute Sovereigns and a court intrigue succeeded in contriving Speransky's fall and exile. The disappointed constitutionalists planned a military rebellion which came off after Alexander I.'s death and was crushed by his successor. Of the whole Speransky's constitution remains the name alone he gave to the national representation, *Gosoudarstvenaia Douma*, and which was adopted by the present Russian constitution.

With Nicholas I. (1825-1855) begins the second section of the Autocratic period, that of Conservative Autocracy. Having become the champion of Absolutism everywhere, Nicholas I. undertook to convert the progressive and temporary dictatorship, which till then had been the Autocracy, into a permanent and stationary form of government. With that object he instituted a systematic reaction against the reforms of Catherine and Alexander I. On the other side he earnestly endeavoured to introduce order and legality into the machine of government, and to protect the people against the arbitrariness of the administration.

The outcome of those efforts was the creation of that type of bureaucrats, outwardly correct and dignified, continuously busy with routine work, devoid of initiative themselves and bent on crushing it in others. Talent and public spirit came to be regarded as dangerous to the State; mediocrity was cultivated as the safest virtue. The Russian intellectuals, at the head of which had marched Catherine and Alexander I., were thus driven into opposition, and the whole literature, which under Nicholas I. rose to a high degree of development, was permeated by a hostile tendency. It is melancholy to observe the failure of that high-minded patriotic monarch's best and most beneficent intentions. Throughout his life he was anxious to free the serfs, but never found the opportune moment for undertaking it. He created, instead, in order to secure his subjects from the abuses of the functionaries, the Corps of Gendarmes, a kind

of occult government, which unfortunately became later an object of even greater complaints than the outward government it had to supervise.

Alexander II. (1855-1881) was the greatest Russian Emperor after Peter the Great, and the wisest and most beneficent of the Russian rulers of all times. His reforms were not mere changes of names and forms, but great, real and essential reforms, at once liberating and constructive. However restricted and vitiated in after years, they are still, amidst the chaos of bureaucratic mismanagement, the only institutions apt to serve as the basis of a renovated Russia. Those reforms lacked only co-ordination and crowning by a national representation. Alexander II. was going to sanction the summoning of a Representative Commission, devised by Count Loris-Melikoff,—which was to have, in truth, only a consultative voice, but would undoubtedly have evolved a full-righted National Assembly—when the Tsar Liberator was murdered!

We have the testimony of one of the most determined opponents of the Autocracy that “moderate concessions” granted at that moment “would have been hailed with enthusiasm and would have paved the way for the gradual and slow passage from absolutism to representative government.”* The Fates denied that achievement to Alexander II. and reserved it for his grandson.

Alexander III. (1881-1894) had a high sense of duty, a firm purpose and a strong will. If he had seen the practical usefulness of a constitution he would certainly have had the courage to establish it. Unfortunately the plan of convening a Zemsky Sabor, laid before him by Count N. Ignatieff, did not strike him as being workable. It was replaced by that of a Commission of Experts nominated by the government. Experts actually arrived in St. Petersburg, but the Commission was not assembled. Some of the confidential advisers of Alexander III. privately gave assurances that the ultimate

* “The Revolution in Russia,” by Prince Kropotkine. “XIXth Century and After,” Dec., 1905.

end of the government was a Zemsky Sabor, composed of representatives of all Russian classes, as under the Moscow Tsars. It was only necessary, before that, to organise Russian Society and to strengthen government authorities. Nothing whatever came out of those far-reaching plans, while under the pretext of strengthening authority, a bureaucratic war was waged against the reforms of Alexander II. The press was curbed, the independence of the judges was curtailed, the Zemstvos restricted in the exercise of functions assigned to them by law, and the whole class of peasants deprived of the right of electing their representatives to the Zemstvos and placed under the tutelage of special functionaries with arbitrary powers. Martial law and a state of reinforced protection were proclaimed in the greater part of Russia and maintained throughout the whole reign. On the other hand, Alexander III. knew how to preserve peace under very difficult circumstances ; he concluded a popular alliance which proved to form a guarantee of peace in Europe ; and he lent his constant support to the efforts of two great ministers, Vychnegradsky and Witte, to establish order in the finances of Russia. Personally Alexander III. was universally respected and his death lamented in and out of Russia. He left his country with all the appearances of might and stability, the prestige of Russia being at its climax. Only, deep underneath and invisible from high places, were lurking germs of great and terrible upheavals.

Nothing could be more natural for his successor, animated moreover by filial piety, than to follow in his father's footsteps. It was the duty of his ministers to inform him of the real state of Russia and to point out the necessary changes. They have singularly failed to do so. And it is the more deplorable as the young Sovereign possessed every quality for recognising the truth once it was placed before him, and of acting accordingly afterwards. Emperor Nicholas II. is of a mild and gentle disposition, a patient and attentive listener, a clever inquirer, a conscientious worker, enlightened, intellectual, and humane. He showed what he could achieve when following his own

inspiration in convening the Hague Conference, which may prove to be a real step towards general and permanent peace.

The Bureaucracy, however, was more solicitous of its own interests, and, not satisfied with having all but destroyed the liberal institutions created by Alexander II., began to assail the conservative safeguards established by Nicholas I. That emperor had edicted that a law, to have its full validity, was to be discussed by the Council of Empire, receive the Imperial sanction, and be promulgated by the Senate. In pursuing their suicidal policy, the Bureaucrats found it more convenient to set the legislative body aside and to make laws by Special Commissions formed of themselves. Also by the so-called Opinions of the Committee of Ministers. Important laws were even drafted neither by the Council of Empire nor by the Ministers, but by inferior officials, from whose report published in the "Official Messenger," legislators and ministers learned the existence of the new law. Finally, laws were suspended or modified by "temporary regulations," not promulgated openly, but contained in secret circulars of the head of some branch of administration. A colossal confusion ensued and it became almost impossible to take any measure without conflicting with some of the innumerable and contradictory, ordinary and extraordinary enactments! And the conscious or unconscious disregard of bureaucrats for known and fundamental rules of the Autocracy undermined the respect for legality even in law-abiding classes of the population, while it encouraged the adversaries of order and authority in the prosecution of their sinister schemes. A startling deterioration became noticeable in the *personnel* of the Bureaucracy. Many of its best elements left it for other careers or occupations, with the consequence that inefficiency and corruption, rife already, became now formidable. They would be, indeed, monstrous if I believed the stories told me by bureaucrats in high position concerning one another. Luckily, by dint of sifting them and confronting each with the other, I have been able to convince myself of the great

exaggeration, if not even complete invention, of many of them, due to mutual suspicion as well as to want of free publicity. I have myself met honourable and dutiful men in almost every branch of the administration, and I believe the majority of the functionaries are honest and thorough, or inclined to be so. Unfortunately, it is the actions of the minority, of those few who know how to manipulate the wheels of the bureaucratic machine, which injure the reputation of and give an appearance of foundation to all kinds of charges against the Russian administration.

Previous to its entire collapse the bureaucracy made one final effort to save its power and to regenerate society by bureaucratic methods. The late M. Plehve was an honest, clever, energetic administrator, though of a limited intellectual horizon and without the depth and breadth of a statesman. His plan was to restore the already shaken authority of the Government and to consolidate it so as to render it invulnerable; then to associate with its work the loyal and well-meaning part of society. The form of that association was never clearly stated by the dictatorial minister; it is supposed that it would have been on the lines of a consultative assembly. What the public saw of it was only the determined crushing of the most timid opposition and of the mildest criticism by quite arbitrary measures and with a complete disregard of existing laws. Yet towards the end of his career, Plehve is believed to have recognised the vanity of his efforts and the necessity of a change of system. He drafted very liberal measures regarding the Jews, which would have greatly improved their condition, and had in view others of a more general character. But, like all Russian, and Continental, conservative statesmen, he proved to be incapable of carrying out even the reforms he most approved. The effects of his system were most disastrous and contributed greatly to increase the violence of the tide of the Revolution. By his persecution of moderate liberal and conservative leaders he disorganised the loyal parties which longed to support a reform compatible with strong monarchical power; while

the radical and revolutionary parties escaped his control and succeeded in strongly organising themselves and preparing strikes and rebellions, as well as Plehve's personal catastrophe.

During all that time the native intelligence and the sympathy of Emperor Nicholas were impelling him to pierce that wall erected by the bureaucrats between him and his people, and to grant the reforms he judged to be necessary for the welfare and the happiness of his country. The manifesto of 1903 proclaimed freedom of conscience for all the religions of Russia and called the people to a comprehensive share in the management of their affairs, extending the sphere of provincial and local self-government. The bureaucracy set her teeth against that act of the Sovereign, narrowed and altered its signification by administrative circulars and orders, and practically prevented its application. After new efforts in 1904, remaining fruitless from the same causes, the Emperor finally imposed his will in August, 1905, and the great principle of national representation was clearly proclaimed. Unfortunately, at that very moment the only statesman able to carry out the Emperor's will was far away performing the great task of pacification. It was only in October, 1905, that a formal constitution, on a broad scale and containing all the liberties considered necessary in most advanced constitutional states, was promulgated, and a unified government created for carrying it out.

It is useless trying to predict the immediate future, and it is safer to turn to the general law of revolutions as exemplified in the history of different European nations. Every revolution can be represented by a curve slowly climbing up, from liberalism to more and more extreme radicalism, till it reaches its climax of anarchy, after which it rapidly descends to a more or less pronounced reaction, mostly a military dictatorship, and, finally, a moderate solution intervenes, the resultant of the forces of movement and of resistance, which provides the measure of order and liberty essential to the further development of a nation. The existence of railways and telegraphs, as well as of all

other appliances of modern civilisation, does not admit such long contests as those of the XVII. or XVIII. centuries, and the duration of the Russian revolution could not approach that of the English or the French, but there would be a danger of the recurrence of the revolutionary movement if the solution were not satisfactory enough to the great majority of the nation.

After a careful collation of the policies and programmes of all important representative parties, I have been able to ascertain the points on which all Russians are, I believe, agreed. These constitute a kind of national programme which might be stated somewhat as follows :

1. Free development of the individual; the four necessary liberties of conscience, speech, meeting, and association.

2. Social reforms.

3. Unity of the Empire, with local and provincial self-government, and equal rights for all religions and nationalities ; and

4. Peaceful foreign policy. This may be further defined :

- (a) Development of the competence of the Hague Tribunal in the sense of the proposals by the Russian Delegates at the first Hague Conference ;

- (b) Abstention from all expansion not justified by the needs of the country and not approved by the nation ;

- (c) Fulfilment of the existing international obligations, such as:—(1) The Franco-Russian Alliance, basis of the Russian Foreign Policy ; (2) The Austro-Russian Special Agreement ; (3) Treaty and moral obligations towards Eastern Christians ; and (4) Moral obligations towards all Slavs, and

- (d) Economic regeneration by the development of the natural wealth of Russia with the assistance of foreign capital and foreign enterprise surrounded with all guarantees.

As regards the economic and financial position of the country, I believe it is the opinion of the best practical judges that the time of acutest stress is over. It is significant that English firms having business in or with Russia are not contracting, but rather extending their operations. Large investments are being made in land, the prices of which have gone down just now, also in industrial shares; new companies are being founded and new concessions eagerly sought and acquired.

Looking at the political future, I must say that to me a disintegration of Russia is simply unthinkable, because no part of the Empire, and no portion of its people, I believe, wish to separate from it. Since recovering what they consider their rightful autonomy the Finlanders are not attempting any further severance, but rather manifest their desire to remain connected with Russia. The most important nationality after the Russian, the Poles, are emphatic in their protests against any suspicion of separatism, which they consider as an insult to their commonsense; the most respected Polish leaders have repeatedly declared that a separation from Russia would only be detrimental to the material and moral interests of the Polish nationality. Neither are the internecine feuds of the Armenians and the Tartars to be considered as militating against the unity of Russia. Various races are so mingled in the Caucasus that none of them could perhaps exist apart from others and without being linked to the rest of the Empire. The Lettish rebellion in Livonia and Courland was directed against the German landlords, and though as a friend of German culture I must deplore the fearful blow it has received there, I cannot see any danger in consequence of it for Russian unity. Much more serious would have been the case if the revolted population of the Baltic provinces were chiefly German.

I should like, finally, to say a few words about Anglo-Russian relations. I arrived in England 13 years ago, imbued with the belief in a permanent Anglo-Russian antagonism. Yet gradually, and to my great astonishment, I became aware that there was absolutely nothing to divide our two

countries except mutual distrust and suspicion. My study of Anglo-Russian questions was already so advanced at the time of the South African war that, in opposition to almost all Continental publicists who saw the case for one side only, I was able to see it for both sides; and in a discussion in the Russian Press concerning the eventual issue of that war, I felt bound to express my opinion that the maintenance of the British naval and colonial paramountcy in the World was, from the standpoint of the interests of Russia, more desirable than its transference to other Powers. In 1901 I joyfully welcomed the remarkable movement towards an understanding with Russia in the British periodical Press, and I believe that had it been more sustained on one side and better understood on the other, it might have then fully achieved its object. Unluckily other influences were more active and persistent, and only one Russian publicist, Mr. Syromiatnikoff, seconded my efforts. A more favourable opportunity arrived at last during my visit to Russia in the summer of 1905.

Before leaving London I was asked by several of my friends here to give the Russians an expression of the goodwill and sympathy of the English; and I could do it the more willingly seeing a corroboration of it in the general attitude of the British Press. Even the organs most opposed to Russian foreign policy were always sympathetic with regard to inner Russian troubles. Good news was invariably hailed with joy and bad news excited sincere regret. I did not fail to give an exact account of it to all Russian statesmen I met at St. Petersburg, and even to the Emperor Nicholas himself. His Majesty spoke of his love of peace, which remains as before in spite of the war he never desired. He mentioned the pleasant memories of his last visit to England in 1896, and his satisfaction at the belief of those Englishmen who then approached him in the sincerity of his love of peace and of his friendly feelings for England. "Whatever was said to the contrary was not true." And he authorised me to repeat those statements in Russia as in England.

Similar expressions of goodwill towards this country I heard this time from Russians of all parties who, all of them, struck me by their sincere wish to live in peaceful and friendly relations with the English. Immense material interests depend on that. England who had so long been the chief importer of manufactured articles into Russia might regain a good deal of her former place in the Russian trade; and Russia who had been chiefly supplying England with grain and raw produce in general might again advantageously compete with other nations. Another powerful link is the interest which each has in the preservation of the peace of the world. And I am convinced there is no surer means of preserving and consolidating it than a sincere friendship between our two countries. That friendship in no way conflicts with the existence of other friendships and alliances of either nation. The Anglo-Russian understanding would be the crowning of the whole edifice of international friendships and the best guarantee of its duration.

In emerging from her dire ordeal, Russia will feel grateful towards those who have shown sympathy with her, and she will be powerful enough to give value to her gratitude.