



The Russian Revolution: sowing the seeds

Dairmid Gunn

The year 1917 was the crucible for an upheaval in Russia, the influence of which was felt across the globe and for many decades. Dairmid Gunn begins 2017 on *Thinking Faith* by explaining how the foundations of the Russian Revolution were beginning to be laid as many as 200 years before the events we will commemorate this year. Two centuries of disarray and dispute, change and creativity in all aspects of Russian life set the scene for a momentous year.

2017 is the centenary year of what the Russians call the Great October Revolution (October by the Julian calendar). It was an event that had immense political and religious significance not only for Russia but for the whole world. Out of it emerged a communist and atheistic dictatorship that was opposed to the mores and beliefs of the Western world.

A tale of two cities

The seeds of this turbulent event were sown as far back as the beginning of the 18th century when Tsar Peter I, better known as Peter the Great (1672-1725), decided to modernise his country by following the example of such countries as France, England and Prussia. To achieve his aim he built the great city of St Petersburg in 1703 at the estuary of the River Neva to give his country access to the Baltic through the Gulf of Finland. Russia would no longer be confined to the use of the city of Archangel in the north for its outlet to northern waters.

St Petersburg was a fortress built on the islands of the Neva and protected Russia from invasion from the West, particularly from Sweden. After the defeat of the Swedes at the Battle of Poltava in 1709, the fortress town expanded on both banks of the Neva to become a beautiful and elegant city worthy of being the capital of a developing empire. Throughout the 18th century, foreign architects, stone masons, ship builders and artists were at work to embellish the new

From Ivan Vladimiri's painting of Bloody Sunday, St Petersburg, 1905. Via Wikimedia Commons.



city. The improvements did not only concern bricks and mortar but also culture in its widest sense. At court, French became the language for social intercourse. Catherine II, more commonly known as [Catherine the Great](#) (1729-1796), prided herself on corresponding with famous figures of the French Enlightenment such as Voltaire and Diderot. St Petersburg had the veneer of a civilised capital city on the level of Paris and London.

But what of Moscow, the ancient capital of Russia? Peter the Great disliked Moscow; he saw that old city with its Kremlin and many churches as representing a dark and backward past; he was concerned only with the present and the future, and saw the Russian Orthodox Church, like Moscow itself, as an impediment to his plans for the aggrandisement of Russia.

Church and state

Peter's arrival on the political scene came at an unfortunate time for the Orthodox Church. In the mid 17th century an influential and distinguished patriarch, Nikon (1605-1681), had introduced some liturgical and linguistic changes to the Church to bring it back into line with the orthodoxy practised in such countries as Greece and Bulgaria. The introduction met with fierce resistance from within the Russian Orthodox Church with a sizeable minority (the Old Believers) leaving the fold to continue with the traditional

forms of worship. On Nikon's death, Peter stepped in and replaced the patriarchate of the weakened Church with a synod of bishops on Lutheran lines. The most important member of the synod was the lay representative of the tsar, the chief procurator. The Orthodox Church had been sidelined by the state. However, although it was often disparaged by the French-speaking elite in St Petersburg, it maintained its appeal in Moscow and the country, and remained an important element in the Russian psyche.

Despite the invasion of foreign words in the process of Westernisation, Russia held its own as the national language. It was the language of the law courts and the Moscow higher educational establishments. Thanks to the efforts of Mikhail Lomonosov (1711-1765) and other philologists, in the course of the 18th century Russian absorbed many words, mainly of an abstract nature, from the Orthodox Church's liturgical language, Church Slavonic. This rich mix was put to full use in the 19th century by such brilliant poets and writers as Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. It was a linguistic triumph over French.

The French Revolution and Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812 saw the end of the cultural flirtation with France which had begun with Catherine the Great. The defeat of Napoleon in what became known as the Great Patriotic War gave birth to a feeling of 'Russianness' in all sectors of society, and also a visible appreciation of the value and importance of the Russian Orthodox Church. The army officers, all French speakers, returning from occupied Paris were aware of the debt owed by Russia to its brave peasantry during the war; however, they were also filled with enthusiasm for certain liberal aspects of political life in the West. They were dissatisfied with the form of autocratic rule in Russia and in December 1825 staged an unsuccessful coup to introduce a more democratic form of governance. The attempted coup led to decades of autocratic rule by the Tsar or Emperor Nicolas I, which ended, at least partially, after the defeat of Russia by Britain and France in the Crimean War (1853-56) and the accession of Alexander II to the throne. In 1861, the new tsar approved legislation for the emancipation of the serfs (the abolition of rural slavery). This significant piece of legislation led to other liberal developments such as the creation of *zemstvos* (rural councils) and the easing of the stricter aspects of censorship.

The sense of reform in the air gave rise to intensive debates among the more educated classes as to the way ahead for the country. There were those who eagerly embraced the *modus vivendi* of the West and admired the atmosphere of tolerance that prevailed there. There were others who saw the way ahead for Russia through the ideas of such philosophers as Nietzsche, Feuerbach, Comte and Marx. Both groups of 'Westerners' desired an end to the autocratic regime, although they differed in their conception of the post-authoritarian regime they wished to see in its place and in their preferred means of achieving their aim. Many Westerners belonged to an undefined and unorganised 'order' called the *intelligentsia*, a word that does not have the same meaning outside Russia. They were drawn from all sections of society and from various educational backgrounds, and were generally agnostics or atheists.

Opposing the authoritarian principles of the existing regime *and* the ideas of the Westerners was another group, the Slavophiles. They insisted that Russia was the embodiment of a deep and original culture based on the Orthodox Christian tradition and that the nation could solve its manifold problems through its own resources rather than by imitating the West. The most prominent spokesman for the Slavophiles was a retired cavalry officer and cultured landowner, Alexey Khomyakov (1804-60), who saw the intrinsic value of *sobornost* (spiritual togetherness without loss of identity) in the Orthodox faith and of the neighbourliness that was inherent in the village communes. He kept abreast of scientific developments and even visited the Great Exhibition in London in 1851. His ideas were more suited to rural communities than to the fast growing proletariat in the big cities. Nevertheless, they touched on a sensitive part of the Russian psyche and occupied an important place in the work of such nationalist composers as Borodin, Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov.

Art imitating life

The great novelists of the 19th century were not active participants in the Western-Slavophile debate but their novels sometimes reflected the problems engendered by the cleavage between the old and new beliefs. In his novel, *Fathers and Sons*, Ivan Turgenev provided a wonderful description of a young nihilist, Bazarov. Anton Chekov in his turn gave a wonderful description of a gentle member of the *intelligentsia*, the

student, Trofimov, in his play *The Cherry Orchard*. The most Christian of the great novelists was Fyodor Dostoyevsky, who was prescient enough to foresee the arrival of the political terrorist, which he vividly depicted in his novel, *The Devils* or *The Possessed*. Through his characters in his greatest novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky encapsulated all aspects of the religious and political scene in [19th century Russia](#) and came out strongly in favour of the religious approach to life. It was little wonder that one of his closest friends was the famous and influential Christian philosopher and poet, Vladimir Solovyov.

The names of Dostoyevsky and Solovyov were still on everyone's lips and in everyone's thoughts when the new century dawned. But there were huge changes afoot in the secular world which the Orthodox Church had to accommodate. The beginning of the century saw the expansion of Russia's interest in the Far East with celebrations in Vladivostok in 1903 to mark the completion of the Trans-Siberian railway. But Russia's territorial interests clashed with those of Japan, and in 1904 the two nations went to war, a war that resulted in a humiliating defeat for the Russians. This loss of prestige was further damaged by the brutal dispersal of a peaceful procession on its way to present a petition to the emperor in St Petersburg in 1905. This incident, named Bloody Sunday, led to serious unrest in the country, which even merited the name of revolution. It forced the emperor's hand, and he was compelled to countenance the formation of a parliament or *duma*, a legislative assembly. It was to be the first of four within a decade in a process that saw the very slow decline of authoritarian rule.

In parallel with significant events in the secular world were those in the artistic, philosophical and religious realms. The first fifteen years of the 20th century saw a flowering of Russian poetry that gained for itself the flattering title of the Silver Age (the Golden Age had been that surrounding the works of Pushkin). The flowering did not confine itself to poetry but spread into the realms of music, visual art and ballet. In all forms of art there was a search for a new meaning and direction that moved many cultured people away from the dull, prevailing creed of positivism. This artistic and philosophical revival was often accompan-

ied by a changed attitude to Christianity in general and the Orthodox Church in particular. This brought about organised personal encounters between the Russian clergy and representatives of the *intelligentsia* under the title of Religio-Philosophical Assemblies. From 1901-1903, twenty one sessions of the Assembly took place and were only ended by the procurator of the synod's fear of the outspoken nature of the debates. All was not lost, as the debates gave the Orthodox Church an opportunity to look at itself and think about much needed reforms to enhance its appeal to believers and non-believers alike. The enthusiasm of the Church for a change led to a pre-conciliar commission being set up in 1906. Subjects discussed included a reorganisation of the Church, the ecclesiastical courts, parish church schools and the participation of the clergy in secular movements. There was an overriding wish for the patriarchate to be restored with the patriarch acting as the council's spokesman in dealing with the state. Unfortunately for the spiritual life of the Church, the recommendations of the commission were not realised. The emperor continually failed to keep his promise to convoke a reforming council for fear of an erosion of his influence in ecclesiastical matters.

Despite the failure of attempts to re-organise the Orthodox Church, its importance in national life received a great boost in 1909 with the publication of a symposium with the name of *Vekhi* ("Signposts"). Seven well-educated men from different backgrounds, including four early believers in Marxism (which they had since renounced), criticised the predominant radicalism of the *intelligentsia*, which was based on materialism and positivism. They asserted the necessity of a religious foundation for any consistent philosophy of life and condemned the revolutionary tendencies that were in evidence at that time. The publication aroused intense interest in intellectual circles, found supporters and critics alike, and engendered considerable debate. Two of the contributors were to become priests and well known figures during and after the Revolution. If the writers of *Vekhi* had done nothing else, they had at least sown the seeds of uncertainty among the positivists and materialists, and suggested revolutionary ways of loosening the iron grip of the autocracy.

Curse or cure?

The autocracy, in the shape of the emperor and the empress and some of their ministers, was its own worst enemy. Although the imperial couple led an exemplary family life they had cut themselves off from reality by avoiding what was contentious in the delicate beginnings of church reform and the aspirations of the *dumas*. They had a fear of the erosion of their place at the heart of Russian life as they understood it. Their problems were compounded by the ill health of the heir apparent, their only son, who was suffering from haemophilia, at that time incurable. In her efforts to combat the illness afflicting her son the empress turned to religion for a cure. She believed in the essential goodness of the peasant folk of her land and the spiritual power of certain holy men who had sprung from simple beginnings. Such men were a common sight wandering from monastery to monastery. A certain self-acclaimed spiritual healer from that milieu, Gregory Rasputin, entered her circle and initially enjoyed some success with his efforts to cure the heir to the throne. This man, who impressed with his strong physique and personality, became indispensable to the empress not only as a healer but also as an advisor. His power over the empress became stronger during the absence of the emperor in his role as commander-in-chief of the army in the Great War (1914-1918). Ministers were appointed and dismissed on his advice. Rumours abounded over his loose morals and his membership of an orgiastic sect. His name, too, worried some as it was derived from the common noun meaning a profligate or libertine.

All this deeply concerned some members of the aristocracy, who saw the influence of this strange man damaging the image of tsardom at a time when the nation was losing a war and losing civic control to revolutionary councils. A plot was hatched to murder him, which was eventually realised in December 1916. Rasputin was poisoned, shot and thrown into the icy waters of the Neva.

The event, quickly hushed up by the authorities, had little bearing on the events that were to lead to the revolutions of 1917. It was certainly a case of too little, too late. The storm clouds had gathered. The final days of 1916 saw the *duma* in disarray, the rising power of peoples' soviets (councils) in the big cities, an increasing number of deserters from a defeated army returning home, and an Orthodox Church seeking reform and still without a patriarch. All this was to change in 1917, the year of two revolutions, with the appearance on the scene of a man called Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known by his assumed name of Lenin.

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