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De spiegel der barbaren. Socialistisch Europa en Revolutionair Rusland (1848 - 1923)

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SUMMARY

This book deals with perceptions and 'images' of Russia held by European socialists in the years 1848-1923. Its aim is to put the 'Russian question' in the Western labour movement of this period in a wider and more historical context. It throws a different light on a number of developments in both Russian and Western socialism but is also meant as a contribution to a better understanding of the contemporary relations between East and West.

Socialism and Communism, tsarist and Soviet Russia have been frequent subjects of historical investigation. The social sciences have shown to what high degree man's concept of reality is determined by his ethnocentrism and social prejudices. A systematic study of the controversial nature of the complex relations between East and West, however, has so far been wanting. And though the enthusiasm for communist Russia in certain Western quarters is known to have been great in the past, the studies devoted to the subject have not come up with a satisfactory explanation as to why this should have been so.

The notions of Russia common at this time were expressions of a general outlook on alien peoples and civilisations inherent to European traditions of long standing, tending either to extol or to despise. The disdain connoted in the 'barbarians' of antiquity and the 'heathens' of medieval times are cases in point of the latter tendency. And the Russians fared no better. The fear and contempt of them first arose in the sixteenth century and have been with us since. In the eighteenth century a second trend, that of an admiring respect became noticeable, in response to the reforms of Peter I and Catharine II. It was at this time, too, that the Russian people were for the first time discovered as an inexhaustable fund of remarkable human qualities.

The eighteenth century ambivalence about Russia crystallized in a pro- and an anti-Russian faction which in different guises have remained part of the European political scene in the following centuries. The French 'philosophes' may be considered the first 'fellow-travellers', inasmuch as they justified the Russian autocratic style of government on the grounds that it enabled large-scale social reforms to be carried through in a rational way. This sympathy for Russia was short-lived, however. Their spiritual heirs proclaimed Russia an enemy of the French Revolution. In the first half of the nineteenth century radical thinkers in Europe, generally, appeared to dread the country, whereas the political Right regarded her with favour. To the thinking of Marx, Engels and like-minded spirits, Russia was a bulwark of reaction and the tsar the 'gendarme' of Europe.

Because of these conflicting emotions the relations between Western and Russian socialists were strained at first. Herzen's and Bakunin's messianic populism was seen as an alien ideology, which was dangerous to Western workers and should be combatted. The failure of the First International is partly attributable to this. Russia's defeat in the Crimean War created confusion in both the camps of the radical Russia-haters and the conservative Russia-lovers. The barbarian colossus had shown itself vulnerable! The reforms of Alexander II and the spread and success of Russian art and literature added yet another aspect to the image of Russia in the West - that of a strangely wonderful and mysterious country. In 1881, when the tsar was assassinated by Russian revolutionaries, the impact on Western socialists was tremendous. The bloody debacle of the Commune of Paris having extinguished any hope of a speedy socialist revolution in Europe, all eyes were on Russia. The use of violence, frowned upon in Western anarchists, was applauded in Russian revolutionaries. Marx became fascinated with Russia and was deeply influenced by populist theories. He despised Russian socialists who

disapproved of the use of revolutionary terror. When he died and these turned out to be the first Russian Marxists and social-democrats Engels refused to take their side in their struggle against the populists.

The tendency to distinguish Russian revolutionary violence from the radical-extremism among their own following, long remained typical of the outlook of most Western socialists. The Russian social-democrats had a hard time around 1900 persuading them that an 'ordinary' workers' movement was a viable issue in Russia and could constitute an important force. The Russian socialists-revolutionaries, the twentieth century successors to the nineteenth century populists, were admired for the violence of their deeds, whereas the disputes among the Russian social-democrats were criticized. The conflict between the moderate Mensheviks on the one hand and the radical Bolsheviks on the other - the source of the conflicting views of communism and socialism and the division of the world into a Western and an Eastern hemisphere, was little understood. Western socialist views of the Russia and Russian socialist views of the West did play an important part, however, in the debate on revisionism. The popular uprising of 1905 aroused great excitement among Western socialists. The mass strikes forcing the tsar to constitutional concessions created the belief that the Russian workers were the 'noble savages' of the twentieth century, fighting for the liberation of all mankind.

From the debate that was held on the issue of the 'general strike', however, it appears that, as in 1881, only a very small number of Western socialists were prepared to follow the Russian example. By pointing out that Russia was not the West the leaders of the Western socialist parties succeeded in restraining the revolutionary fervour of their own parties. The intense and searching discussions around 1905 by the Russian socialists about the nature of their revolution, passed Western-Europe by, largely unheeded. At that time the utopian and not very democratic views of Trotsky and Lenin did not come in for any serious criticism by Western Marxists and socialists. The ideas of the Mensheviks concerning the necessity of a bourgeois democratic revolution in Russia and their efforts to organize a workers' movement of a Western type, were little appreciated. Yet the process of modernization that was going on and the experiment with a constitutional form of government led people in the West to believe that the tsarist empire would before long be a Western country like any other. The socialists, too, slowly adapted themselves to this view. Notably after 1909, when the Azef-affaire had exposed the close link between criminal and revolutionary violence. From 1914 onwards not only the growing opposition to the war in socialist circles, but the rise of a 'centrist' mood within the European workers' movement and the February Revolution of 1917 as well, did their part in enhancing the prestige of moderate Russian socialists.

After the October Revolution with WWI not over yet and Russia under the scourge of civil war, it was hard for Russian and Western socialists to keep in touch. Soon Europe was suffering from the dread of communism and revolution, and the old, well-known, anti-Russian and anti-socialist sentiments re-established themselves in the public mind. The workers' movement was divided and reluctant to take revolutionary action while the war lasted. Its response to the October Revolution was at first wary and hesitant. The collapse of the German and Austrian empires and the social and political turmoil that came in the wake of the war and which lasted till 1923, brought about a change in their attitude. The holding off of a social revolution in the West caused socialism to fall apart, a minority of workers and socialists relapsing into the traditional left-wing idolization of revolutionary Russia. These people came so utterly to despair of their revolutionary power, that in 1919-1921 they accepted the leadership of Moscow and turned a deaf ear to any piece of negative information about Russia.

The anti-Bolshevik fervour of a small number of Russian socialists in the West had little effect on them. These Russians did however influence Karl Kautsky, whose writings hardened the reformist European socialists in their aversion to a coup d'état by a revolutionary minority. Although at first most of the leaders of the socialist 'centre' were willing to condone a dictatorship in Russia as a communist experiment in a backward country, they were not inclined to follow the Russian example. However, they were unable to stem the growing tide of radicalism in their own following and could not prevent the splitting up of their parties. One had to be either for or against communism. In 1920, when contact with Russia was on a more regular footing again, quite a few of the 'centrist' leaders showed themselves susceptible to a more sophisticated and balanced view of the issues of democracy and dictatorship and the nature of the Bolshevik regime, a viewpoint that had all along been propagated by the majority of the Mensheviks in Russia and (later) in the West. This change of opinion led in 1921 to the foundation of the Vienna Union or the 2 ½ International, which was to endeavour in vain to reunite the workers' movement under the banner of a twofold rejection of both dictatorial communism and nationalistic reformism.

Russian socialists were as divided over the issue of communism as Western socialists. The October Revolution posed problems which they did not know how to solve. The attempts of the socialist-revolutionaries to raise the democratic forces in Russia for an armed rebellion against Bolshevik dictatorship, failed. The attempts of the Mensheviks to operate as a strictly legal opposition party within the Soviet constitution failed too. The liquidation of democratic socialism in Soviet Russia forestalled the 'united front' with the socialists that had been propagated by the communists in 1921. In 1923 the Socialist and Labour International was founded, the outcome of a fusion of the reformist and 'centrist' trends within the workers' movement. Russian socialist émigrés retained considerable influence though they did not succeed in completely winning over Western socialists to their point of view. This was partly owing to their own internal division and the inadequacy of their own insights, partly to the perceptions and 'images' of Russia in the West, which, in keeping their hold over socialist opinion have long succeeded in sustaining the socialist love and hatred of communism and the Soviet Union.

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