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What a Czech thinks of Russia.

[*Part of a survey of religious opportunity in Slav countries, with special reference to Baptist work.*]

IT is not easy to understand the religious situation of Russia, as it is not easy to understand Russia from any standpoint. The reason lies in the immense greatness of this vast country.

Russia is a country of extremes; she is the greatest country of the world with regard to square miles—a state which has the larger parts of two great continents connected together. The Russians are numerically the greatest nation among civilised people, and the strongest (with regard to body), and healthiest people in the world. Their country is the home of the most severe cold and tropical heat—therefore this country has produced a nation which was, and always will be, a nation of extremes.

The Russians were always big; under the Tartar yoke they suffered in a real Christian humility that produced the typical Russian nihilism. But the same Russians could again persecute their own countrymen (political and religious prisoners) in the mines of Siberia with such a terror that the very name of Siberia was sadly famous in the whole world because of its persecutions. The palaces of the Russian nobility, because of their luxury, were real fairy lands, and in the same country were so many poor people, especially among the intelligent class. Southern Russia is the barn of the world; because of its rich soil it could feed the whole world; yet that very country to-day is the scene of the greatest hunger that the human mind can imagine. The Russian peasant so honoured his Czar with religious fanaticism that he pronounced his name in one breath with the name of God—"God is high and Czar too far." (This was a Russian saying intended to indicate the reason why there is evil in the world.) And the same Russian peasant, when he became a revolutionist in his deep hatred against the dynasty, did not know limits.

Russia has the best saints, as Tolstoy, and the worst of traitors, as Suchomlinov. The Russian can burn because of his racial feeling, can go to liberate his Balkan brethren from the Turkish yoke. The same Russian persecutes at home his Polish brother.

The same is true in education. Nobody can beat the Russian in his thirst for education; nowhere in the world are so many university students as in Russia, students who were dying and are dying because of hunger only because they wish to satisfy the hunger of the soul. And yet there is not a civilised country in the world where there are so many illiterates as in Russia. It cannot be otherwise. In Russia European culture and Asiatic barbarism shake hands.

And it is only natural that Russia was the same during the war. When she saw that the small Serbia was attacked by a giant, she did not wait, did not think over, but mobilised her millions against the oppressor. And while the rest of Europe was on the defensive, Russia, with her successful offensive on the East front, gave a great blow to Germany and Austria and her big armies invaded great parts of the enemies' country. Russia won as did no other Entente country; captured millions of soldiers. But when she lost at Gorlice, her defeat was unique in its terrible consequences, because of so many traitors.

And there was necessary a big blow before the Russian sleeping giant was awaked. But when he awoke, the awakening was again big. The gigantic nation could not do anything "in nuce," either good or evil. It was a revolution which the world did not clearly see; a revolution first without a single drop of human blood, but afterwards in floods of blood. By this awakening the giant frightened the whole world: the giant got up, straightened his limbs over both continents, the Spring of a new life compelled him to burst out in all the old views which had been stored in his soul for centuries.

Yes, this titanic nation never loved small things: he knew only lapidar deeds.

If we consider these facts we shall understand why the conditions of to-day in Russia are of such an extreme type. It is only natural in Russia. The Russians split the throne and sent to Petrograd the orator Kerensky. And Kerensky broke the chains on the hand of the Russian and put in them the greatest treasure—liberty. And then he sent him away with few phrases which the listener did not understand. And the Russian pendulum went from the extreme right to the extreme left. Out of the slave there came a passionate radical. In a few months he was sick of the National Liberty. He wanted more. He wanted something that did not as yet exist: he wanted Russia to succeed in what had never previously succeeded—Communism.

The Russian ceased to take interest in the question which nation will win in Europe. The fight for a square mile had no

attraction for him. He had space enough. He wished for social justice.

Exhausted he comes home. When the war broke out, they ordered him to give everything : life, family, property, for his country, because she was in danger. And the Russian obeyed and he went, and he gave all. And now he comes home. And what does he find at home? His family with broken health; his wife with consumption; children with beginnings of life-long illness; his property is gone, because his wife exchanged his property for food in order that the family might not die. He himself comes home as a ruin, physically and mentally. But he would not be a revolutionist if somebody could have persuaded him that his country needed his sufferings, and especially that *everybody* did what he did. But the returned soldier goes out and observes his neighbourhood in order to find out what he did fight for. And he sees the neighbour to his right, the neighbour to whom the same country said in the beginning of the war that he ought to stay at home, that he ought to work on ammunition, and that by doing it he will serve his country as well as the soldiers. And this neighbour was a proprietor of a small shop before the war; now he is a millionaire who, because of pride, does not wish even to talk to the man who lost everything for his country. Excited to the utmost, the Russian soldier turns to his left. There he finds the farmer who also was allowed to stay at home in order to feed the army—as a patriotic deed. Before the war he was a small peasant—to-day he is a rich man, who not only paid his debts, but to him the wife of the soldier had to leave all her property that her family might be saved. And now the Russian soldier starts to think : did I fight for this? I *lost* all for the country, and these people *won* all—also for the country. He feels instinctively that there is something wrong. He cannot lose anything more, he lost everything. He goes to the street and becomes a revolutionist; he risks everything. He wishes to see justice; they sent him to war for justice, but it seems to him that he fought for greater injustice than was before the war. He wishes a change, he wishes to realise what the greatest brains could not realise. And now there come to him people who tell him that the only cure is communism. He believes it, and he becomes the consistent instrument in the hands of the leaders with the proverbial Russian devotion.

Thus the Russians became bolsheviks.

And the same conditions can be found on the religious field. The Russians were and always will be religious radicals. The Latin nations produced Roman Catholicism, and in this form of Christianity emphasised especially the form, and therefore the

beauty of the religious service was the chief aim, the feeling was very much cultivated because of it, and so they gave to the world especially Christian art. The strong side of this religion became however the weak point, and so the Roman Catholic Church, because of her rich pomp, became proud and strong in her principle to stand *above* the state.

The Teuton nations produced Protestantism, which emphasises in religion especially the contents, the truth itself. Therefore the mind was so much cultivated that Protestantism gave to the world as a gift modern philosophy, and therefore the radical Protestant Churches, being led by the reason, incline to the separation of the state and church.

Altogether different are the conditions among the Slavs.

The typical Slav form of Christianity is the Greek Orthodox Church, which emphasises especially, in religion, the deed, the love. Therefore the will was especially cultivated and the will created the deep social sense, and therefore the Russian wishes to see his Church so connected with the state that they may be inseparably united.

But it would not be Russia if this typical form of Christianity had not its extreme on the other side. On one side we see ecclesiasticism so emphasised that it forms an inseparable union with the state, so that the head of the state must be the head of the church also. But at the same time, on the other side, the same country is the birthplace of so many and so radical sectarians that it has become a sectarian country "par excellence."

And the same is true of the prophets of Russia. The thirteenth apostle of Christ, Tolstoy, a young Russian count with a life of a loose Parisien "bonivant," leaves his sinful art of living, and becomes, through a sincere repentance, a real Christian. He emphasises the mighty tenet of Christianity, love, to such an extreme that he cries to the militaristic world, "Do not resist evil."

The Russian in his religious zeal, so distinguished from the pious Roman Catholic, distributes Bibles among his countrymen with the permission of the Holy Synod; but when the reader of the Bible finds out by his reading the Primitive Apostolic Religion, and at once radically begins to preach it, the same Russian who before was distributing the Bible, imprisons his brother because he practises what he had read.

You can feel religion in Russia everywhere. Whosoever crosses the frontier of Russia must see it. The Russian religion is a wonderful combination of idealism with realism. Nowhere

in the world is the Christian almsgiving practised in such an ideal way as in Russia; the donor gives and does not ask if the acceptor is worthy of the gift. The Greek Orthodox Church spreads Bibles without any fear—which cannot be said about the Roman Catholic Church. The marriage of the priests makes them morally superior to their Roman Catholic colleagues.

But in spite of these advantages, the Greek Orthodox Church has many shadows. The Greek Orthodox Church is not a Christian institution with Greek colour, but a Greek institution with Christian colour. The apostles would not find their brethren in the Holy Synod. Take out a few Christian words from this religion, such as evangelism, Christ, Bible, and there will be left scarcely anything which would recall Christianity. The Greek Orthodox Church is practically a continuation of the antique Greek religion. Therefore the Russians call the religion of the sectarians “the new faith”—the religion of the first Christians is quite new to them. As in old Greece, the gods required first of all ritual obedience, so to-day in Russia the whole religion practically means bowing before “holy” pictures, lighting of candles, and crossing. To the majority of the Russians, religion means ritualism. Nothing is so sad as when a Christian sees to-day in Russia that the religion of spirit and truth is transfigured to mean idolatry. One of the chief points of Christ’s programme was the fight against ceremony. Because Christ dared to speak against such kind of religion He was crucified—and they dare to preach such religion in His name!

Tradition and ceremony are two big words in the Greek Orthodox Church; they are two characteristic signs of this religion, but they also show how far it is from the religion of Jesus Christ. In the Greek Orthodox Church preaching has but a small and humble place. The whole sermon contained before war a few empty sentences about loyalty to the Czar and his government. And to-day, if they are secret monarchists, they do the same, or speak favourably about the present government. In preaching is the Greek Orthodox Church inferior even to the Roman Catholic Church.

In dogmatics the ideal of this church is to keep up the tradition, to watch that no new thought, no new idea, may enter their system. The priests tried to create peace among the believers, but they produced the worst kind of peace, the peace which practically means death. In the meantime, when Europe was healthily disquieted by a religious revolution—Reformation—the Greek Orthodox Church slept in peace. They did not give to the world a single prophet, reformer, or genius. Tolstoy was created by Russia, not by the Greek Orthodox Church. The

Greek Orthodox Church hates religious liberty. They are so proud of their orthodox faith, they keep it so close to the eyes of its believers, that they tremble before this faith. Who has not this faith is considered to be a leper. The truer the Head of the Synod is to the church the more intolerant he is. And the cause of religious liberty did not win by the change of the government. Just as the Czar's government persecuted, so does the bolshevick government.

In one word the Greek Orthodox Church is wonderfully lukewarm.

It is significant that although the Czecho-slovaks were great Panslavists long before the war, and although many leaders of this movement were making propaganda for the Greek Orthodox Church among the Roman Catholic Czecho-slovaks, in order to bring closer together these two Slav nations—the propaganda was never successful. The only explanation is—the Greek Orthodox Church is not a missionary Church, and it is not a missionary Church because it has no inward power.

But the human heart is a living thing, and it can never stay for a long time in the religious cemetery of the Greek Orthodox Church. And because nobody helped from outside the religious life in Russia found its own way. This is the natural process : first the contents and then the form. The one advantage of the Greek Orthodox Church—the distribution of the Bibles—was used by Divine Providence as a means for the new movement.

The history of the modern Russian Reformation is so similar to the old Czecho-slovak Reformation : a simple man, without the theological intricacies which sometimes by its explanations does more harm than good, reads the Book of Books, and by his unprejudiced soul finds out that the Christian Church to which he belonged until now is no Christian Church, and he starts to practise what he had read in the New Testament without any priestly help whatsoever, and without knowing that there are in the world people who call themselves Baptists, and—he becomes a Baptist. This is the greatest story in the history of the Baptists. And it is our greatest credit and satisfaction—and our only Christian vengeance for all the persecuting we had to endure in the past centuries.

Thus came into existence many Baptist Churches in Russia. Whole villages were practising Baptist principles for a long time without knowing that they have millions of Baptist brethren in the world. And they joined our big family after they were told about us.

It will be one of the most honourable duties of that Baptist

delegate to go round from one Russian village to another as soon as it is possible, and just do nothing else than be welcomed by a new Baptist body, which came into existence by the immediate influence of the New Testament. And it will be one of the greatest days of the Baptist denomination when the Baptist World Congress will listen with tears in eyes and secret prayer in heart to the story of that delegate about the victory of the Spirit of God among those to whom nobody preached but the Word of God itself.

And these Russian Baptist brethren are probably to-day already one of the strongest Baptist bodies in the world, if not numerically, at least with regard to quality. The Russian Baptist received his high place in the Kingdom of God. By his blood which was shed in the mines of Siberia he belongs to the noble group of Christian martyrs. The Greek Orthodox Church is dying. Christianity lives! The more the Holy Synod was sending the heralds of the "new faith" to Siberia, in order to extinguish their light in the dark mines, the more they live. Nowhere were the sectarians persecuted as in Siberia, but nowhere did they show how a Christian can suffer for his convictions. Cut him to pieces, but he will remain true! Find a man in Russia who does not drink vodka, who does not curse, does not lie, and with mathematical assurance you can say that he is a sectarian.

Now there are many in European and American business men who have prepared storehouses full of merchandise in order to send many trains to Russia with this merchandise and to get hold of the Russian business. And they have a ready plan how to occupy the Russian markets. They very well know that only he will be the victor who will come first and with a prepared plan—when Russia will be open again to business.

What have we prepared for Russia—we Baptists of the world? Have we prepared plans, have we prepared goods in our spiritual storehouses? Shall we be the first ones to go to Russia, after Russia will be open? Will others go before us: will business men put us Christians to shame?

Such opportunities as God gave us in Russia to-day do not come every day in history. They come only once in centuries.

God help us that the great time may find us big enough for the big tasks. Let us be big to-day in preparations and let us be big at once in work.

JOSEF NOVOTNY.