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WRITER AS A POLITICAL PROPHET: THE CASE OF IVANOV

It is known that the pen of the genius is often "smarter" than the genius himself. The point here is that the artist (e.g., poet) could express in his poetry political and philosophical ideas without fully comprehending them. As a matter of fact, this provides the justification for the interpretation of the writer's work. Georgii Ivanov, a well-known Russian poet who emigrated after the Bolshevik Revolution, could serve as an example here. His book *Book About the Last Reign* (*Kniga o poslednem tsarstvovanii*), was in no way a philosophical treatise.¹ Ivanov turned to the reign of the last Russian czar to elaborate on the role of a fatal accident in shaping history. Indeed, for him the end of the Russian monarchy was due to the character of the representatives of the ruling dynasty, mostly the emperor and empress, of course. At the same time, however, the poet's actual penetration of the country's political reality was much deeper. He approached Russian reality through the prism of the two major paradigms prevailing in the emigre world, i.e., "French" and "Eurasianist."

Ivanov had never regarded himself as a philosopher and even less as a political scientist of any sort. Ivanov viewed himself mostly as a poet, a man of belles-lettres. Early on, he came to the conclusion that it was this that was his "personal calling."² In 1912 Ivanov published his first poetic collections, and upon the publishing of his second book he was recognized by his peers as the poet with the "distinctive face."³ As a writer Ivanov also became known before the Bolshevik Revolution, and his output was considerable. Ivanov's style had already been shaped by that time.

Ivanov was the author of a book under the title *The Book about the Last Reign*, which could be regarded as one of his major works. The book deals with the last years of the imperial regime and provides explanation for the regime's debacle. There were actually two kinds of explanation. One was on the surface. The other was on the cultural subconscious level, so to speak.

Ivanov was not a social scientist and, on the surface, had interest in history (including recent history) exclusively as an artist. Indeed he "writes about painting, philosophy, social phenomenon and on exclusively historical subjects, but of course, dealt with these subjects not as the professional historians, but as a writer for whom picturesqueness of the events and emotional reincarnation in

the character of the historical person, is more important than two-dimensional eruditions and abstract regularity."⁴ It is apparent that Ivanov, similar to many emigres, failed to see the inevitability of the collapse of the monarchy. At least the idea often dominated Ivanov's mind. It is apparent that while elaborating on the reason for the catastrophe which befell his country he came to the conclusion that everything was mostly due to the crucial accidents. And it was the czar and his wife who were mostly responsible.

Ivanov apparently shared the ideas of the few monarchists who stated that Russia needed a strong ruler. Alexander the Third was such a ruler. Ivanov conveyed his appreciation for the emperor's tough character by the following phrase, "He (Alexander the Third) wants to die in his general's jacket." This one line "demonstrates a lot in the emperor's character."⁵ While Russia needed a person with the character of Alexander the Third, it was Nicholas II who was the country's ruler. According to Professor Kreid, the specialist on Ivanov:

He sees in the Tsar the strange passiveness, predilection to chimerical ideas and fantastical dreams. Inclination to the arbitrariness and absolute stubbornness coexist in these tragic persons with that of "tiny will"; the absence of the character with stubbornness. In G. Ivanov's presentations, from one hand there is a very polite and delicate man, from the other hand one can see in him something "terrible" and at the same time doomed.⁶

While the role of the Russian czar was crucially important, the role of the empress was equally important. As a matter of fact, Ivanov shared the widespread opinion that the empress had influenced her husband in the wrong way and was even more responsible than Nicholas himself for the collapse of the monarchy. Professor Kreid implied that Ivanov apparently stressed the empress' traits of character which made her role fatal in the country's political development. She was not an emotionally stable person and had "deformed religious feeling," and these were the reasons why she had been constantly surrounded by "various crooks."⁷

The empress had misgivings about the actual repercussions of her actions and often misinterpreted the signals. "The Tsarine is falling into abyss, but she imagines that she flies in the blue orthodox sky about which she had dreamed since her childhood." While taking the wrong step, she had a strong character and instinctively wanted to dominate her husband's "unstable will."⁸ Thus, on the surface Ivanov had actually reduced the reason for the collapse of the monarchy to the crucial accident, i.e., the fatal combination of the weak emperor and the strong-willed but rather stupid empress, which led the monarchy and the country to downfall.

This vision of Russian history, i.e., attempt to find the downfall of the monarchy in the negative characteristics of the royal couple, dominated Ivanov's mind, yet it constituted only one of the layers. The other layer of Ivanov's mind intuitively found the more important reason for the downfall. Subconsciously (and these feelings were translated in his writings) he assumed that Russia had been historically doomed regardless of the personal characteristics of the country's rulers. Ivanov conveyed these messages, almost against his own will, via two historical models in which Russian history was incorporated. These theories, both quite popular among emigres, could be called "Oriental" and "European." Each of them viewed Russia from two different angles. According to the "Oriental" model, Russia was nothing but an Oriental country with its destiny sharply different from the West. The supporters of this model could be called Eurasianists, and this strain of thought had a long tradition in the country. Indeed Eurasianists had a lot in common with Slavophiles, who, since the nineteenth century, had emphasized Russia's Slavic uniqueness which made her sharply at odds with the West. The "European" model implied a different scenario of the country's development. It stressed that Russia actually belonged to the West and followed the road of European countries. While "Eurasianists" represented the "Oriental" model, early twentieth-century Westernizers saw Russian history in the context of French history, mostly of the French Revolution. In Ivanov's view Russia was closer to the West and would follow the model of the French Revolution. Yet this would not ensure the country's reinvigoration after the years of turmoil but instead would lead to its final doom.

The meaning of the Bolshevik Revolution and of Russian history, per se, was the most important problem for emigre thought, and emigres put forward several interpretations. The first theory was espoused by those who called themselves "Eurasians."⁹ Their point was that Russia neither belonged to Europe nor was it culturally unique. As a matter of fact, these emigre intellectuals claimed, Russia belonged to the great cultural and political entity which included the nations of Eastern Europe as well as Asia, and it was the Mongol Empire which was regarded as the real founder of the Russian and then the Soviet Empire. Totalitarian regime was viewed in such a case as being intrinsic to Russian and Soviet statehood, and the Bolshevik Revolution was viewed as being a manifestation of these deep-rooted totalitarian proclivities.¹⁰ While observing the Russian/Soviet history as being totalitarian in its very essence, they (especially the Left Eurasianists) cast a rather positive light on this totalitarian foundation of the Soviet state. In their view, the conquest of all of Eurasia, and possibly world domination, was the country's destiny. While viewing the Soviet empire's imperialistic ambitions rather approvingly as the manifestation of the country's destiny, they were also ready to praise the regime's complete control over the society's political and economic life for the following reasons: this complete control over so-

ciety's economy was necessary to complete mastery over nature, thus fulfilling mankind's final destiny. Here some of the Eurasians were under the strong influence of Nikolai F. Fedorov (1828–1903), the eccentric philosopher who viewed victory over nature and even death (according to him, the dead "fathers" should be resurrected by "living sons") as mankind's main goal, and it was Russia which should lead the world to the omega of history. Undoubtedly Ivanov was aware of the Eurasian theory, yet for Ivanov Russia's imperial ambitions, including that of striving to dominate Asia, were nothing but imperial *hubris* which would inevitably lead the country to impending doom. Ivanov made his point quite clear when he dwelt on the beginning of the Russian-Japanese War.

According to Ivanov, Russia was actually responsible for the beginning of the hostilities with Japan; Japan, a peaceful nation, had no intention of tempting its northern neighbors and was ready to keep as low a profile as possible in order to keep the peace. Ivanov presents the following story. Nicholas, as heir of the Russian throne at that time, was wounded during his trip to Japan. The Japanese emperor, "against all [his] country's traditions," decided to visit Nicholas, yet the audience was refused because "the heir is tired."¹¹ Nicholas haughtily refused the invitation to visit the imperial palace and live there until he was completely recuperated. He also refused a second invitation to visit Tokyo as a sign of "the magnanimous forgiveness of the Japanese nation." And he completed the emperor's (and implicitly the entire Japanese nation's) humiliation by compelling the emperor to express his best wishes to Nicholas on the deck of the Russian ship.¹² The Japanese submissiveness convinced Nicholas, as well as those who surrounded him, that "Russia is a natural leader and the conqueror [of entire] Asia."¹³ And "the thoughts about spreading of 'the glory of the Russian Czar' somewhere in the midst of Asia are swarming in his head."¹⁴ Nicholas dreamed about the conquest of most of China and Korea and looked at Japan as an inferior nation which could be easily crushed without ado. Not only Nicholas and his courtiers shared this jingoistic illusion about Asian conquest and claims for world domination, but the Russian populace was also tempted and viewed the Japanese as easy prey, despising "Macaco" who would be easily crushed.¹⁵

Ivanov does not elaborate on the consequences of the Russian/Japanese War but makes implications that from the very beginning of Nicholas' reign, Russia's imperial might had been broken. And Ivanov related the following episode: during the coronation the "heavy diamond chain of St. Andrew (Andrei Pervozvany), the symbol of the might and invincibility which had been already put on him [Nicholas], fell from the ermine mantle and fell near Nicholas' foot."¹⁶

Russia, Ivanov implied, would not be a great "Eurasian" empire, the dominant nation in Asia and the entire world. The war with Japan was not the beginning of the country's road to world domination but the beginning of the impen-

ding doom (to use Vladimir Solov'ev's expression) the "yellow children will play around with the pieces of the flags of the Russian army."

While discarding the Eurasian model, Ivanov implicitly saw no reason why Russia should be different from the West. He discarded not only the Eurasianists' geopolitical fantasies but also the Slavophiles' illusions about the special relationship between the Russian czar and his people. These assumptions were pretty close to the ideas preached by the Eurasianists, and indeed there was a lot in common between the Eurasianists and the Slavophiles. In Ivanov's view, the Russian monarchy was doomed to follow the calamities of the other monarchs and was most likely to repeat the tragedy of the French Revolution, certainly without any chance to rise again as a great power.

Ivanov implicitly suggested that the pre-Petrine Russian monarchy was indeed close to the people and that its autocrats were imbued with feelings of responsibility for their flock and deep religious consciousness.¹⁷ Yet after Peter the Great (as Ivanov implied) inflicted a mortal blow to Orthodox religion and created a powerful bureaucracy which permanently separated the Czar from his people, the Russian autocracy became rotten to its very core and no attempt could have saved it. The Khodynka catastrophe, where thousands of Russian citizens perished in the crowd which impatiently awaited the coronation gifts, was a good example of the Czar's actual disregard for the lives of his people. The deaths of thousands did not prevent him from enjoying a splendid party.¹⁸ The empress' constant attempt to be close to the people by wooing the adventurers also was of no avail; as a matter of fact, her actions actually made the imperial family even more distant from their people, implicitly speeding up the impending doom.¹⁹

What indeed worked (as Ivanov implied) was the French model, i.e., similarity between the Russian monarchy of Nicholas' time and the French monarchy at the time of Louis XVI. To emphasize this similarity (not only the similarities of the political institutions but those between the fate of the Russian imperial couple and the fate of the French royal couple), Ivanov recalled the following story. The Russian empress, who felt insecure in her personal position and implicitly in the Russian monarchy, per se, had a strong predilection to various adventures whom she expected to save the monarchy by some sort of miracle. One of them, a Frenchman named Philip, was a predecessor of Rasputin. While claiming he was going to save the Russian monarchy (similar to Rasputin) he had actually pushed it into the abyss. To illustrate this, Ivanov related the following episode. To demonstrate his supernatural powers, Philip organized a spiritualistic seance in Paris during which he evoked the image of the executed Louis XVI.²⁰ This image, Ivanov implied, should have demonstrated the direction in which these adventurers would push the Russian monarchy and should have discouraged the

Russian empress from dealing with such types of persons. Yet quite the opposite happened, and Philip was invited to the Russian court.

The French model (Ivanov implied) was the most appropriate to understand the country's political development, and he apparently compared the Bolshevik regime with that of the French Jacobins. Yet he did not see any Russian Thermidor, i.e., a subsiding of the level of violence, in the future. The bestial reign of the Russian Jacobins would be indefinite. To press this point, Ivanov ended his essay about Nicholas and his wife with the story of the soldiers who at the beginning of the 1917 Revolution discussed the way to kill Vrybova, an intimate friend of the last Russian empress.²¹

Thus in Ivanov's view the Russians had no positive alternative. Their government would be brutal and despotic, yet not a great power which would inspire awe and fear among the nations of the earth. It would not be a new Rome nor a Mongol Empire, and those Russian rulers – whether Nicholas or Stalin – who would dream of being a new Genghis Khan would sooner or later lead the country to catastrophe. Russia's orderly Orthodox monarchy, with autocrat and people bonded together by spiritual ties, was also a Slavophile illusion; such a relationship (if it existed at all) had been destroyed centuries before, and no one would be able to bring it back. Nor was the West European model of development (the French script) an outlet: the country could experience a bloody revolution quite similar (at least in its external appearance) to that of the French. Yet contrary to the Western experience, the brutality would never subside and an orderly European-type government would hardly emerge in the future. In short, Russia had no outlet and no hope. She was doomed to be desolate and petty, even in her crime; the external glamour of the last years of the *ancien regime* was only a veneer covering the stink of the rotting body.

Ivanov actually cursed Russia in the way the Jewish prophets had cursed Israel and Jerusalem for their endless sins and hubris. The curse was most vehement because those who had committed the crimes were a chosen people.²² Yet the prophets rejected the "terrestrial Jerusalem" for the "celestial" one, pure and spotless, which would descend from the sky as "a bride bedecked for her husband." While for the Jewish prophets this "celestial" Jerusalem would come in the future, Ivanov assumed that his "celestial" Russia already existed: it was his poetry, the great Russian literature. This "celestial Russia" was placed outside of time and space and could shine amidst his motherland's misery.

The major point of this article is to demonstrate that the poet had two perceptions of reality, one of which he was cognizant and which he consciously tried to elaborate. The other was intuitive, in many cases existing parallel to his conscious perception of reality. The poet might not even have been aware of this other level, yet not only did it exist but it enabled the poet to see what he could not see on a rational level. It was not unusual for poets, through sort of revela-

tion, to grasp concepts which were not subjects for scientific exploration in the narrow meaning of the term (e.g., eternity) from the Romantic era onward. What was special in Ivanov's case was that in his capacity as a poet he made quite sharp observations, not about the metaphysical questions but about the nature of Russian history. With a prophet's vision, he had grasped the internal breakdown, not of the Soviet regime but actually of Russia as a state. He also implied that even the classical Russian culture might be foreign to Russia in the same way that the culture of classical Greece became, to a certain degree, foreign to contemporary Greece.

The striking quality of Ivanov as a writer was not understood by Ivanov himself. It was hardly understood by his contemporaries. It could be understood only by those who had witnessed the collapse of the USSR and the dramatic degeneration of not only Russia's military might and economic potential but also Russian culture.

Notes

- 1 Georgii Ivanov, *Kniga o poslednem tsarstvovanii*, pod redaktsiei, s predisloviiem i kommentariiami Vadima Kreida, Orange, CT: Antiquary, 1990. There were many editions of Ivanov's works. The most complete collection of his work recently appeared in Russia: Georgii Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomach*, vol. 3, sostavlenie, podgotovka teksta, vstupitel'naia stat'ia E.V. Vitkovskogo, kommentarii G.I. Moseshvili, redaktor V.P. Kochetov, Moskva, Soglasie, 1994.
- 2 Ibid, 12.
- 3 Ibid, 6.
- 4 Ibid, 10.
- 5 Ibid, 16.
- 6 Ibid, 14.
- 7 Ibid, 15.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 The Oriental foundation of the Soviet regime was also elaborated by the Western scholars. For them, it was due not so much to the Russian historical tradition but rather was due to the very nature of the regime. See, for example: Karl August Wittfogel, *Oriental despotism; a comparative study of total power*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957.
- 10 Ibid.

¹¹ Ivanov, *Kniga o poslednem...*, 85.

¹² Ibid, 86.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, 87.

¹⁵ Ibid, 91.

¹⁶ Ibid, 56.

¹⁷ Ibid, 18.

¹⁸ Ibid, 73.

¹⁹ Ibid, 45.

²⁰ Ibid, 33.

²¹ Ibid, 106–107.

²² This approach to Russian life could provide an analogy between Ivanov and Protopope Avvakum, one of the founders of Russian schism in the seventeenth century. See his major work: Protopope Avvakum Petrovich, *Zhitie protopopa Avvakuma; Zhitie inoka Epifaniia; Zhitie boiaryni Morozovoi*, izdanie podgotovleno N.V. Ponyrko, Sankt-Peterburg, Glagol, 1994.