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The passing and the permanent in the Russian Revolution, 1931.

THE PASSING AND THE PERMANENT IN THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

AT
THE TEMPLE
SUNDAY
NOV. 29th, 1931
BY

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER

It is of course altogether too early even to attempt to prognosticate about what is likely to be passing and what is likely to be permanent in the Russian revolution. One can not foresee the role which the revolution will take any more than one can foresee the path which a tornado will decry.

But if one wishes to take a long view of history, not a view of a decade, but in terms of a century, and bring his historical knowledge to bear upon a given situation, one may draw certain conclusions which may be, I say, which may be, warranted, but avowedly do not possess any finality or any absoluteness about them.

I believe that out of the Russian experiment will come certain values which will have permanent significance for the human race just as there have come out of it already certain values

Central planning for the economic life of a people did not originate in Russia. In a sense it has been going on for more than a quarter of a century. It was inevitable in the economic process which the machine set in operation, - that process whose outstanding characteristic is mass financing, mergers or independent and mercantile units into mass organization and central management over mass production and distribution.

What is novel in Russia's five year plan is that the central planning is done by the State. The State is doing the planning for an industry which is State owned and State operated. And the apparent success of this plan of large scale economic planning in Russia which has enabled Russia to keep its people employed and favorably employed, while the countries of the Western World, especially the more advanced countries of the Western World, in spite of their greater industrial development, are plunged into an economic depression with millions of their people unemployed, - the apparent success of the central control of industry in Russia has brought dramatically home to the industrialists of America and the Western World the need of some

central planning of its own economic life, some way of obtaining a balance between the consumptive needs and capacities of the people and production.

To any one who takes a large view of history, it is clear that the era of inrestricted individualism in business and industry has entered upon its final stages. And Russia seems to indicate what the next stage is likely to be. Russia's experiment of central planning does not prove that that can be achieved only through dictatorship or through the abolition of private property. It is conceivable that a capitalist society may evolve a satisfactory system of control either through local boards of control in the major industries and ultimately building up with one supreme economic board of experts at the head which will regulate the rate of production, price, etc. This would of course, limit the power of the individual and his effort for unlimited profits but would not eliminate him, nor destroy private capital. - I say it is conceivable that that central planning could be achieved within the frame work of a capitalist society. The principal of central planning is sound and it remains to be seen whether a capitalist society can adopt it and operate it.

If it can not. It will not be the principal of central planning which will go, It will be the capitalist system which will collapse because the old method, borrowed from the older civilization

Another one is the industrialization of Russia. Now this industrialization would undoubtedly have come without Bolshevism. It is inconceivable that in a world that is having vast industrialization that Russia alone should have remained medieval industrially, a government that did not interfere with the industrial life of its people. Russia would be industrialized. Perhaps not at such a tempo, but undoubtedly it would be industrialized.

Russia has borrowed both its methods and technique from Western Europe and America. Industrialization is in fact a product of Western capitalism. Bolshevism eager to save the revolution by making Russia self sustaining and eager to hold the loyalty of the people by giving them a higher standard of living than they had under the Czar, put on a campaign which for scope, vigor, tempo, is unparallelled in the history of the world. The country presents the picture of an army on the march, keyed up to a terrific pitch of enthusiasm. How long that pitch can be maintained is quite another

question. But for the time being industrialization in Russia is a religion. With us it is only a fact. In Russia the process of industrialization has become a religion.

They talk about it in almost apocalyptic terms.

The tractor, the dynamo, the power station is almost a religious idol, if you will, to which Russians today are paying an almost primitive adoration. The machine is God and Savior in Russia.

We, here in the Western World are a bit tired of the machine and also a bit afraid of it. We talk of man versus the machine, who will be master, man or the machine. Stuart Chase in his address last Monday evening in the Temple Lecture Course gave an address on just this topic, "Shall Man be Slave or Master of the Machine."

We have for years now had myriads of machines, all shapes, all sizes, most cunning which produced in super abundance all the commodities which we enjoyed. We have had that industrialization for which Russia is now struggling with such eagerness. We are a bit fed up with it. We tested it and found it wanting. It has given us certain facilities and comforts but it has not given us that paradise which they believe their machines will give them.

good things of life. We don't need such peaks. They are not necessary in a wholesome society. And more and more, the worker, the man who produces by his brain or brawn, by his mind or his hand, he will become central in our economic thinking and planning and not the private seeking capitalist.

And another permanent gain of the revolution and a tremendously important one, I believe, is the manner in which Russia has taught the world how nationalities may live in harmony and cooperate with one another.

Russia at the outset of the revolution gave absolute cultural autonomy to the racial groups in Russia. If a small racial group wishes to use its own language, its own schools and its own courts of law it is not only enabled to do so, but is given every encouragement to do so. That source of irritation, of bitterness existing in the life of a country like Roumania, Austria Hungary or Czecho-Slavaci. that constant friction between racial groups, one trying to stamp out the individuality of another group, that does not exist in Russia today. There is no race discrimination in Russia, no nace segregation, no lynching of people because of their cult, no numurus clouses against certain race or religion, those miserable discriminations which befoul half of the countries of the world.

Anti-semitism which is rampant in other countries, officially at least, has been stamped out in Russia. Russia has pointed the way which we in the United States will have to learn again with blood and tears, of how races may live together side by side, without destroying one another and without tramping upon one another's souls.

There are, I believe, certain phases of the Russian experiment which are purely transitory and one of them is Russia's dictatorship. The Bolesheviks themselves, say it is a preparatory stage, a necessary and unavoidable, passing stage to complete freedom. I doubt it. My study of history has taught me to believe that dictatorship never devolves itself gradually. It breaks, but it doesn't heal. The advocates of class dictatorship here and abroad argue that such a regime is a transitional stage to the ultimate and perfected society. And they justify the annihilation of liberalism in Russia today by the promise of greater liberalism to come in the future. And many American liberals have been beguiled and beatific about Russia and have had little or nothing to say, strangely enough, about the suppression of certain fundamental human rights, freedom of thought, freedom of speech, assembly, expression, the right to differ, - values which they so strongly defend here at home, in a capitalist society. They have had little or nothing to say in

It may well be that mankind today is facing an epoch of dictatorship, not only in Russia but here and elsewhere. It may be that the need for a reorganization which mankind is confronting will necessitate and require some form of dictatorship for a period of time. It may be that we are in for it. But those who know man's hunger for freedom, those who know man's ageless struggle to live his own life, to fulfill his own destiny, to rescue himself from the group, the many, I believe, those who are acquainted with that age-old struggle will not look upon this fact of a progressive dictatorial life as good or as necessarily permanent.

I am inclined to believe that Russia is going to have many more revolutions but the revolution which the dictators of Russia need to

fear is not the counter revolution of the restoration of Czarism or even private capitalism, but that revolution which will some day burst p forth out of these despised liberal forces of Russia, out of the numbers of Russians who are increasingly becoming more and more educated and who will some day become terribly tired of the surveillance, regimentation and espionage under which life has been subjected and will reach out for a measure of intellectual and political freedom.

Dictatorship, I regard as a passing phase of the Russian revolution.

And so do I look upon some of the phases of what they call the newsmorality as a passing phase, even as I regard some of these phases of ours as passing phases.

There is much that is far more admirable in the moral tone of Fussia today than in Western Europe and America. Russia today simply will not tolerate that literature, that sex saturated moving picture, that exhibitionist dance, that jungle music which they regard as manifestations of the decadent bourgeois civilization and which characterizes and cheapens and degrades our own cultural life. There is much more in a sense, of Puritanism among Russian youth, if you will, than in this country.

Of course the Russian marriage laws and divorce laws are lax, but we are running Russia a close second in this laxity. Let's not

We have nothing to brag about our morality in this country. We already have one divorce for every six marriages in the United States.

I believe that both will sober up. Both Russia and the the United States and/Western world, after it washes itself clean of the backwash of that filthy war, and regains its moral and intellectual sanity. The women of the world will not tolerate for long a system which demoralizes the world. They are the first victims and then their children, of sex laxity.

Russian women are already beginning to rebel against it.

In fact if you read the latest in Russian literature, already the outreaching for some of the older morality is evidenced. Recently I read a book by Boris Pilnyak, a very fine and interesting book called "The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea," which revolves like all Russian books, around the building of a dam for industrialization purposes.

Two characters both construction engineers who play fast and loose with moral standards. In the end both come to grief, both try suicide.

Before both are destroyed, one has this to say. I want to read this to you. It is symptomatic of the turn in trends. They have come to

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it is above board.

look upon the economic morality as a social economic asset which gives permanence to a social system and contributes to the stability and efficiency of life.

"Do you know what a controlling bandage is? No? I'll tell you. You cut your finger; you work in an institution or at the plant; you come to a first-aid station; you are sent to the controlling doctor; the controlling doctor puts a bandage on your finger and seals it so that you may not untie the bandage at home and begin selfsabotaging. This is done because many people were sick and consequently away from the plant for a month with a small wound which should have healed in three days. This is done because of the selfsabotagers, for it turns out more beneficial to be ill than to be in good health. I must not trust myself; I am an individual; but one cannot stop the plant on account of cases of individual sabotage: so I am bound in a controlling bandage for the good of the state. I believe that it is just such controlling bandages, placed not on our fingers but on our souls, that neither of us recognizes. It is just such controlling bandages that have brought me here into these meadows at this hour of night."

"You, of course, are aware that the cigarettes we are smoking, your and my boots, apartments, and so forth, are not only our property, but the property of the state, to the same extent as mineral wealth, locomotives, and grain sown by the peasant. There can be either more or less of them. Now we are straining every muscle to accumulate as many trousers, boots, plants, as much grain and as many

machines, as possible; for this purpose you are building your monolith. # During the years of war and revolution we have lost many boots and much grain."

"But there was something I didn't know - besides, my time died - and you didn't know it either until this evening. It seems that, like boots and grain, the morals of each of us are also property and not a knowledge that we gradually learn to respect, but precise morality, moral qualities. And it turns out that morality may be squandered just like boots and grain; the revolution has squandered it. Morality will have to be restored like boots and sown areas, because morality is a simple and an actual economic unit, no less necessary than soats or potatoes. When the moral resources are exhausted to the point of Zero, then the results are we - or, at any rate, I. This happens when the last calorie of moral qualities has been exhausted. But morality, like cloth, may be of good quality - like English cloth - or of an inferior grade, like our cloth."

"We say that our country is ignorant, ignorance itself; our people are ignorant - having been spoiled, or corrupted, thanks to Russian darkness. This argument is not right, because one can turn sour like molded bread not only through ignorance but through corrupt morality - or perhaps because of absence of any morality. The controlling bandage is a matter of morality, not of knowledge or ignorance, just like dishonesty in regard to a woman,

have not been scientifically demonstrated. It is not the last word in philosophy. In fact it is the first and most obvious. Modern and recent discoveries in the field of science are knocking the last prop from under this interpretations of the nature of the universe and no economic system, however desirable, can long perpetuate a false scientific theory.

view, not tomorrow or in the next year or in the next decade, but a long view, Russia will find its religion. Religion will emerge in Russia. Perhaps not in its present form, I might say certainly not in its present form, but nevertheless a religion vitally built on the conception of an intelligent purposeful universe, a friendly universe in which man is at home, and in which he can play a decisive role; a religion which will proclaim the dogma of human progress and the value of human ideals; a religion which will maintain that the ultimate victory belongs to goodness, not to evil, to reason, not to insensibility, to life and not to death, a religion which will sublimate human life without falsifying and preach its eternal code of justice, love, peace and righteousness.

I think religion in Russia will not lack form, color, cult or shrine, even though they are pulling down some of the sacred

shrines in Russia today. They will build others. The soul of man in Russia, as elsewhere, will not make forever a sanctuary of the shop and the factory. Nor will it be content with the sciences and the arts. There is hunger in the human soul for something above things. There is hunger in the human soul to link itself up with the universal, to corelate its world of values with the world of cosmic values, to atune itself with some of these mysteries. And that mystery will, I believe, express itself in some forms of religious thought. When many people think alike, they will join together and build churches and temples and shrines.

These, I believe my friends, are some of the passing and the permanent in that amazing thing which happened in Russia in 1917 and which has continued for nigh a decade and a half. We have much to learn from it. Russia has much to learn from us. What we ought to have towards it is a free and open sympathetic mind, to observe, to study, to interpret, not to rail or denounce. The future belongs to truth. That people whose faith is grounded in greater truth is the people who will enjoy the greater blessing of the good life.

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