

The Russian Twilight Of Late Imperial America | The American Conservative

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Doomed Tsar Nicholas II and Tsaritsa Alexandra. (Photo by The Print Collector/Print Collector/Getty Images)

“You know what they say about Russia,” said my Moscow translator and guide. “Once you’ve been here, you’re going to come back. You can’t get it out of your head.”

I’ve been home from Russia for about a month, and I’m starting to understand what he means. Or rather, I don’t *understand* it (yet), but I *feel* it, and feel it with more strength the more distance there is between me and that country.

This weekend I’ve been reading, for my research purposes, [The Icon and the Axe](#), James Billington’s revered 1966 history of Russian culture. [Billington](#) was a distinguished Russia scholar and Librarian of Congress from 1987 until his retirement in 2015. He died last year at 89. It has been a revelation to read in his work about the culture of Russia between 1890 and the 1917 revolution. It seems eerily like our own in some pretty fundamental ways. I want to tell you a little bit about this.

According to Billington, in the 1890s, younger Russian elites became frustrated with the country’s long struggle towards constitutional liberalism, especially when the reactionary Tsar Alexander III took over from his assassinated father, a (relative) liberal who had ended serfdom. The new generation of intellectuals and artists moved into two different directions: dialectical materialism (that is, Marxism, whose leading exponent at the time was Gyorgi Plekhanov), and transcendental idealism, along the lines of the visionary Christian thinker Vladimir Soloviev. Plekhanov, the father of Russian Marxism, wanted to revitalize society through working-class revolution. Soloviev, an Orthodox Christian, but one strongly influenced by Western Christianity, sought social renaissance through a return to a kind of religious mysticism.

Writes Billington, “The materialists claimed to be the heirs to the traditions of the iconoclastic Sixties [1860s] ; the idealists claimed to be developing the traditions of Dostoevsky’s aesthetic and religious reaction to iconoclasm.” What drove them was “the exasperation of a new student generation with the subjectivism, pessimism, and introspection of the age of small deeds.” Writes Billington, the “new radicals of both right and left” were both seeking “some new philosophic bedrock on which to stand.”

Reading this, I thought about how old-fashioned liberalism in our own polity is in decline, and how the younger generations on both the Left and the Right want something more radical. I shouldn’t have to say this, but I’ll do it: obviously there are massive differences between a liberal constitutional republic, as the US has been since its founding, and an autocracy, as Russia always had been. The parallel, though, is that in 1890s Russia, the kind of people who were young liberals a generation earlier were now becoming young radicals. In the US, all the ideological energy among the young is with increasingly illiberal versions of Left and Right. We may all miss liberalism once it’s gone, but it’s hard to find

convinced, persuasive defenders today.

(One important aspect of our own situation is that the liberal elites who run the institutions, especially academic and media, often cave to left-wing illiberalism, showing that they don't have the courage of their professed convictions. And yet, they are worried to death about right-wing illiberalism! I don't blame them for their concern, given what they say they believe, but their blindness to their weakness on their own left flank also blinds them to a force — leftist illiberalism — that drives the same thing on the Right. I was listening today to an NPR host talk about the baffling menace of right-wing illiberalism, and wanted to shout, "You moron, you don't even understand how you people are oxygen to its fire!")

Anyway, back to Russia. Billington says that three forces shaped Russian culture and society from 1890 until the 1917 Revolution and just beyond: Prometheanism, sensualism, and apocalypticism.

Prometheanism, the author says, is "the belief that man — when truly aware of his true powers — is capable of totally transforming the world in which he lives." The intellectual and artistic elites really did believe that anything was possible through the exercise of man's will, through the use of science and technology. Orthodox Christianity was a dry husk. In St. Petersburg, an intellectual movement known as "God-building" arose. It was a form of the social gospel, transferring the "God-seeking" of Christianity to concrete action on earth, and to revolution. The God-Builders figured out that religion, in which they didn't believe, was a powerful force for change. Instead of God, they began worshipping the People, and, like the Jacobins before them, tried to create a humanistic pseudo-religion. Anatoly Lunacharsky, one of their leaders (and later a Soviet official), taught that Marxists should think of their project in explicitly religious terms. (As I blogged not long ago, [in talking about Yuri Slezkine's recent history of the Russian Revolution](#), the Bolsheviks, materialists to the marrow, all thought in quasi-religious ways.) Maxim Gorky wrote in his 1908 novel [A Confession](#) this prayer to "the almighty, immortal people!":

"Thou art my God and the creator of all gods. ... And there shall be no other gods in the world but thee, for thou art the one God that creates miracles!"

Lenin hated all religion, and thought that any talk of religion weakened the Marxist position. The God-Builders' thought didn't survive the Revolution. Still, it is interesting to think of God-Building as a version of the this-worldly Social Gospel of progressive Christianity, or of the human-centered Moralistic Therapeutic Deism common even in non-progressive churches, or of any of the new forms of self-generated spirituality arising among the post-Christian generation. (The religion writer [Tara Isabella Burton has a good book coming out next year about this spirituality](#), which is extremely diverse, but united by the shared belief that religion is something Man generates within himself to meet his felt spiritual needs, including a desire for transcendence.)

Billington says along with this Promethean idealism of the early 20th century came "a preoccupation with sex that is quite without parallel in earlier Russian culture." He says that "the increasing preoccupation with sexual matters was a logical development of the romantic preoccupation with the will that had become characteristic of the emancipated aristocratic intelligentsia."

In other words, in the first half of the 19th century, liberal Russian aristocrats had drunk deeply of European Romanticism, which emphasized individual passion and experience over abstract rationalism. It makes sense that they would turn to the individual's sexual experiences as a source of wisdom and spiritual revival. The

abolition of censorship in Russia after 1905 opened the door to erotic literature. There began to appear among intellectual and social elites the idea that utopia would come into being through sexual permissiveness. As Billington points out, Rasputin was totally debauched, but the aristocrats who murdered him were possibly even more sexually corrupt.

The dominant role that sensualism of our own age, and the role pornography, widely distributed and easily available on the Internet, plays in advancing it, hardly needs to be established. It is interesting, though, to think of how Silicon Valley — the epicenter of 21st century Prometheanism — is ruled by a fantastically wealthy elite that is also notably debauched (see Emily Chang’s *Vanity Fair* piece, [“Inside Silicon Valley’s Secret, Orgiastic Dark Side”](#)). It is not difficult to see the parallels between the Prometheanism and sensualism of pre-revolutionary Russian culture, and our own [Homo Deus](#) techno-utopianism.

Here’s something different, though. The “the third ideological current of the age” was apocalypticism — and, at the 1917 revolution, the most relevant of all. Yes, religious apocalypticism was strong with the Orthodox peasantry, but a different kind of apocalypticism entranced elites. It’s stunning to read this august historian writing about the enthusiasm of Russian artists and intellectuals of that era for Satan. The devil was the ultimate Romantic, self-willed figure, after all, giving the sensualism — the sexual permissiveness, and the general craving for sensual experience, a strong grounding in the demonic.

Billington writes:

“This sense of the satanic presence led to a brooding and apocalyptic mentality. Apocalypticism, the third key characteristic of the era, was in many ways the by-product of the unresolved psychological tension between the other two: Prometheanism and sensualism. How, after all, can one reconcile great expectations with petty preoccupations? an intellectual belief in a coming utopia and a simultaneous personal involvement in debauchery? One way of holding on to both commitments was to convince oneself with a certain amount of *Schadenfreude* that apocalyptic change was in the offing, that the sensualism of today forebodes the transformation of tomorrow. As Diaghilev put it during the revolutionary year of 1905 (in a toast delivered in connection with the exhibit of three thousand Russian historical portraits which he organized at the Tauride Palace):

“We are witnesses of the greatest moment of summing-up in history, in the name of a new and unknown culture, which will be created by us, and which will also sweep us away. That is why, without fear or misgiving, I raise my glass to the ruined walls of the beautiful palaces, as well as to the new commandments of a new aesthetic. The only wish that I, an incorrigible sensualist, can express, is that the forthcoming struggle should not damage the amenities of life, and that the death should be as beautiful and as illuminating as the resurrection.”

Diaghilev, a renown Russian art critic (and founder of the Ballets Russe), had spent the previous summer going through old Russian palaces and aristocratic mansions selecting canvases for the exhibition. That experience, plus his awareness of what was going on in the country — mass upheaval in 1905 caused a significant weakening of Tsarist autocracy — taught Diaghilev that something truly revolutionary was on its way. It is characteristic of the time, and of the faith people then had in Progress, that Diaghilev, in giving that toast at a banquet at Moscow’s

Hotel Metropol, was certain that it was bound to be something great.

What he, and Russia, got was the Bolshevik yoke — state-induced famine, the gulag archipelago, the Terror, the destruction of country. But they didn't know that was coming. Billington says that many intellectuals welcomed the Revolution as the advent of a New Jerusalem. Andrei Bely even wrote a novel celebrating the Revolution, and titled it, *Christ Is Risen* — the traditional exclamation at Orthodox Easter services, and through the Paschal season.

Billington emphasizes that the late imperial period's obsession with Prometheanism and sensualism was “essentially anti-Christian.” Mind you, he's writing as a scholar of history and culture, not as a Christian polemicist. It's simply true. And our own 21st-century American obsession with the same since at least the 1960s is a sign that we have passed into the post-Christian period. Again and again, I say unto you: the secular prophet Philip Rieff got it all right in his book *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, which came out the same years as *The Icon And The Axe*. Rieff knew that Christianity, as the narrative that bound and inspired the West, was over — and that the Sexual Revolution, which was just beginning, thanks in large part to the technological innovation of the birth control pill, was the handwriting on the wall declaring the new order.

Billington says that Prometheanism and sensualism were equally strong in Europe, but apocalypticism was a Russian thing. He writes:

Each of the three attitudes of the age was an extension of an idea already present among the anguished aristocratic philosophers of the nineteenth century: Prometheanism made explicit the transfer from God to man of the title to dominion over the external world; sensualism brought to the surface their secret fascination with the world of immediate physiological satisfaction and with its demonic patron; apocalypticism represented an agonizing, often masochistic clinging to the Judeo-Christian idea of retribution by those unable to believe in salvation.

Historian Yuri Slezkine writes powerfully about that final point, in his book *The House Of Government*. He quotes from Bolshevik sources, writing in the pre-revolutionary period, talking about the coming revolution as an apocalypse that will settle accounts with the rich through apocalyptic violence.

In our situation, what we lack at the present moment is a strong apocalypticism. It's certainly present to some degree. Pop Christianity goes through periodic ruminations on End Times prophetic scenarios. For Evangelicals, it was the best-selling *Late Great Planet Earth* in the 1970s, and the *Left Behind* series in the 1990s. For Catholics, the abiding interest in visions of the Virgin Mary (e.g., Medjugorje) both stokes and expresses this sentiment. More recently, my own [Benedict Option](#) is apocalyptic, not in a Jesus-is-coming way, and certainly not in prophesying epochal violence, but rather in diagnosing an end to the Christian era parallel to the demise of paganism in fourth-century Rome. It's a gentle apocalypse, but from a spiritual point of view, an apocalypse it certainly is. History is not determined in advance, which is why I propose that a Christianity that has been preserved through the long night of decline and decay can provide the seeds of resurrection. In fact, if post-communist Russia is going to have a chance at thriving, it's going to have to go deep into its Orthodox Christian roots.

Still, Christian apocalypticism has not reached a fever pitch, or had any meaningful political expressions, not that I can see. Secular apocalypticism is present among the more extreme environmental activists. I think the cult of Social Justice is “an agonizing, often masochistic clinging to the Judeo-Christian idea of

retribution” by those who are unable to believe in forgiveness, or to believe in a world to come in which God will deliver ultimate justice. If you have seen the Sexual Revolution, and the women’s movement, and the Civil Rights movement, and you have observed that people remain broken and unhappy, you can either rethink your premises in light of human fallibility, or you can double down. If you cannot or will not believe in some version of the Judeo-Christian idea of Original Sin, and insist, despite experience and evidence, that Man is born good, but corrupted by society, then the only path left to you is to get radical about punishing the evildoers whose presence among us prevents Utopia.

It is clear to me that progressivism is moving more and more towards social-justice apocalypticism, but until reading that passage in Billington today, I had not quite made the connection that the hysteria of the SJWs is connected inextricably to the inability of *homo Deus*, and *homo coitus*, to bring about the New Jerusalem in this life. I intuited the connection, but Billington knitted together the reading I’ve been doing about the pseudo-religious dimension of the Bolshevik revolution with the exalted stance we moderns take toward technology, sexuality, and the choosing individual.

What event or events do you think would raise apocalypticism — religious and secular — to the same level of influence that Prometheanism and sensualism have in our society today? A sustained period of catastrophic weather, and resulting mass suffering, that can be plausibly connected to global warming could do it. A deadly global pandemic might. So could a new Great Depression. My point is, apocalypticism is present but latent — for now. The book I’m working on, which doesn’t yet have a title, is intended to make conservatives (and others) aware of the present dangers of slipping into a soft version of the totalitarianism that overtook Russia, and the countries it occupied after the Second World War. The Bolsheviks didn’t come from nowhere.

It was amazing to me, though by now it shouldn’t be, to realize that we haven’t learned a damn thing from the history of the 20th century. It is hard to imagine anybody of Diaghilev’s stature making that kind of toast today, but then again, there might be some tech billionaire sitting at a dinner party in Mountain View tonight, raising his glass to the Brave New World being born from the Valley’s creative destruction.

Yeah, I haven’t been able to get Russia out of my head, all right.

UPDATE: Really good comment by reader Aleks:

To me, the most striking similarity between U.S. society now and that of late imperial Russia is the general anxiety and anger with which has taken over people. I do believe it was much the result of radical ideology which proved to be the harbinger that turned human beings into animals; the anger and resentment of the elites and monarchy by the peasant and working classes was indeed incredible if you read Orlando Figes’ account of revolutionary Russia. In addition, there is obviously something to be said about the role of the Russian intellectuals during the fin du siècle which helped to bring out this viciousness. I think these are real similarities to our present time. Namely the cultural and socio-economic gaps in this country are beginning to manifest itself in a certain type of reactionary anger or “cancel culture”, to borrow a term from Obama, which is real. Even in the sense of how one individual on the street perceives another. For instance, if you read Figes’ account of revolutionary St. Petersburg beginning first with 1905, he describes the appalling amount of

random acts of violence which were occurring daily. Any semblance of higher socio-economic status – often times simply the way a person was dressed when walking down the street – could be met with violence, or conflict at the minimum. That revolutionary anxiety and the fanatical desire to destroy all hierarchy and tradition began to steadily eat away at society, much like it is today. And in the process the cultural erosion of Russian society shifted into overdrive. Say what you will about Maxim Gorky, however his heart wrenching accounts of how revolutionary angst and anger (from all ideological sides) began to envelop the everyday Russian going about his or her day, and the consequences which it subsequently had on the traditional forms of Russian culture definitely ring true in our present time.

I don't think it's simply a coincidence that our society is so broken, divided and has such difficulty in finding commonality with one another as we perhaps once did. Every little slight, nasty look or put down is now amplified. I mean the word "trigger" is now commonly used to describe this phenomenon (again no coincidence that much like the Bolsheviks did the left now regularly attempts to inject brand new words into our lexicon.) Fortunately, I think (and hope) that civilized society has evolved over the past century enough that this anxiety or anger will not graduate into open violence or anarchy like it did in fin du siecle Russia. Yet I truly believe there is an animalistic rage which burns beneath the surface in the general populace of this country today that may have nowhere to suffocate until it is too late.