

SOCIALIST EUROPE AND
REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA:
PERCEPTION AND PREJUDICE
1848–1923

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INTRODUCTION

For a long time the Iron Curtain has been seen as the main obstacle to the normalization of relations between East and West. Since it disappeared in 1989 the contrast between the prosperous and politically stable nations in Western Europe and their less endowed counterparts in the East has turned out to be far more marked than we thought. Although mutual contacts have become more intensive and diverse, the continuing dissimilarity between the two halves of Europe in many ways precludes the establishment of normal relations. The disastrous situation in Central and Eastern Europe is largely the result of communist dictatorship. It is still worth while to study the history of communism since it continues to exert its influence even in the post-communist era. Nevertheless, we should be careful not to blame every manifestation of abnormality in our present and future connections with Central and Eastern Europe on its communist period. It is also possible that a more remote past is still playing tricks on us. There is a substantial amount of historical literature proving that the relationship between Russia and Europe has hardly ever been 'normal' and that the cause of this had nothing to do with Soviet communism.

In this book the sometimes pernicious influence of traditional Western attitudes towards Russia is studied in detail and over a long period. It 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 contemporary relations between East and West. When I started my research it seemed useful to study one particular problem which had been an important subject of discussion within the socialist movement as a whole and throughout almost all of its history. Until then the history of socialism had been written mainly from a national point of view, or within a national framework. At the same time I wanted to give special attention to the history of non-Bolshevik Russian socialism, and especially to Menshevism, because this topic had not been studied exhaustively in the West and had been neglected in the Soviet Union. By studying Russian social democracy not exclusively as a purely Russian matter but as an element in the development of European socialism I also hoped to get a better understanding of certain events in the history of the Internationals and of the socialist parties of the West.

This was not the only or even the principal reason for the writing of this book. The material I studied revealed a European image of Russia and a European Russian policy behind which lay a definite pattern of prejudiced opinions: a mental framework which was evidently extremely resistant to change. It reminded one of the *prisons de longue durée* in which, according to Braudel, human thought and behaviour can be fettered for centuries.¹ The scholarly world since the Second World War has been intensively engaged in social and political judgements. It has become established that stereotyped thought about the behaviour of other groups of people is not something particularly Western, but a universal human trait. The same is true of the human tendency to form a mental image of the world in which people have to orientate themselves by means of a sort of mental map. On this map each different area has its own emotional colour. Ethnocentrism, the tendency to emphasise the excellence of one's own community, is likewise something encountered all over the world.² In the relations between the West and the rest of the world such large groups of people are involved that the term 'macro-ethnocentrism' has been coined. However, the social scientists have not been very active in this subject.³

Nevertheless, we know very well that many of these 'old-fashioned' prejudices about nations and peoples die hard. We are also to some extent conscious of the fact that prejudices

cannot be totally eradicated because our knowledge of reality remains incomplete. The need for an opinion, even if it is an irresponsible generalisation about matters of which we know little, will always exist. Unavoidably these opinions adopt standardised forms determined by culture and history and become fossilised into prejudices. These prejudices endure because they not infrequently contain something of the truth and are apparently validated by observations from reality. It is more rarely appreciated that prejudices have a chameleon-like character and, after they have been hunted down and rejected as untrue, can reappear in a new form. 'The adequate record of even the confusions of our forebears', wrote A. O. Lovejoy, 'may help, not only to clarify those confusions, but to engender a salutary doubt whether we are wholly immune from different but equally great confusions.'⁴ And indeed not only our parents were 'mistaken' about Russia. Our forefathers were equally mistaken. These errors did not only emanate from disdain for non-Western backwardness and lack of civilisation. We have also projected our aspirations on to foreign peoples, and admired or even venerated them. The world outside Europe has been our mirror.

The practitioners of the social sciences have thought up the term 'negative ethnocentrism' for this phenomenon, but they have not paid it much attention. It is, however, something which confronted me very frequently in the historical material I was studying. A few historians and sociologists have already gone into this problem. David Caute and Paul Hollander have each devoted a book to the enthusiasm of fellow-travellers and political pilgrims for Soviet Russia.⁵ But the explanations given by these authors for the existence of the curious opinions about Russia, China, Cuba, and so on, are not completely satisfactory. According to Caute the glorification of 'leftist' dictators by 'leftist' intellectuals is an after-effect of the ideals of the eighteenth century. He therefore gave his book the subtitle *A postscript to the Enlightenment*. Hollander rejects this thesis in imitation of the American philosopher Lewis Feuer. In his view the explanation must be sought in the 'alienation' or 'estrangement' of the Western intellectual in the twentieth century. There is no need to take up a stand either for or against one of these two interpretations. In no way do they rule each other out, but rather they

complement each other. In my opinion they are not incorrect, but inadequate.

In the last half-century there have, after all, always been intellectuals who have refused to embrace 'socialist' dictators. Men like Raymond Aron or Albert Camus cannot be discounted as reactionaries or accomplices of the establishment. There is little reason to suppose that the ideals of the Enlightenment had no hold over them, or that the alienation phenomena that can be the result of an intellectual attitude passed them by. The glorification of 'leftist' despotism was, moreover, definitely not the preserve of intellectuals. It is barely necessary to mention the average member of a Western communist party here. The fellow-travellers and the political pilgrims who visited Soviet Russia after 1917 included many who were neither communists nor intellectuals. The same is true of the Europeans who aired comparable opinions about the Third World. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, in fact, tsarist Russia was glorified by *conservative* intellectuals, who had every reason to feel alienated and displaced in Western society. Of equal importance is the fact that 'leftist' Europe has never agreed about Soviet Russia since 1917. Opinions were very much divided. Finally, the eighteenth century has possibly been of decisive importance for various forms of thought which have had great influence in this century, but the origin of our attitude to the non-European world does not lie there. Its roots can be traced back deep in classical Antiquity. Beside a tradition which has stood firm for so many centuries and through so many generations of Europeans, comparatively modern concepts such as Enlightenment or alienation lose much of their value as explanatory interpretations.

In short, we are dealing with a complicated and comprehensive phenomenon which not only profoundly modified our emotions towards the non-Western world in the past but which continues to do so at the present time. It is impossible to offer the one and only correct explanation for this. But since historians such as Léon Poliakov and Norman Cohn have made us aware that the most barbaric expressions of hatred of the Jews possibly originated in very old myths that were deeply anchored in our culture, we have no need to be greatly surprised at the antiquity, the intricacy, the range and the timelessness of Western

European ethnocentrism.⁶ If we are ready to acknowledge this, then the question emerges as to how it should be studied. Naturally I do not pretend to have found the correct approach or method for this. But it remains of importance to know more about the subject and for that purpose this book may offer certain advantages. By devoting attention to a period in which the ideological opposition between capitalism and communism did not yet exist in the form we became used to after 1917, the ethnocentric background of the East–West antithesis can more easily be laid bare. The book analyses the attitudes of a large group of people in Europe and over a long period. It shows how their opinions about Russia proceeded from particular historical developments and how these views in their turn influenced those developments.

A great advantage of the period chosen is that a number of Russians who gave their own views unmolested and had no obligations to a dictatorial state, play the most important role in this account, both as fellow players and as opposite numbers. East–West relations within the socialist world can, in this way, be illuminated from both sides, whereas for a later period this would be impossible. Of course this study has its limitations. It is certainly not a complete inventory of the relationships between Russian and Western socialists. To achieve that end one would need to write a much more extensive work than this already substantial book. The emphasis is upon those people and matters which in my view provide the most insight into the ‘Russian question’. In doing this the Mensheviks receive more attention than the Bolsheviks or the Bundists and the Russian social democrats more than the Russian anarchists or the socialist revolutionaries. For the same reason more information will be found about German social democracy than about British or Belgian socialism. This is meant to be a book about a specific part of the historical background of big movements like Russian socialism or main events like the October revolution. These important movements and events themselves are therefore only summarily dealt with. Finally, in more than a merely geographical sense Russia has always been a part of Europe. Between 1945 and 1989 Central Europe disappeared from the political map and we understood the expressions East and West and Eastern and Western Europe somewhat differently than before

the Second World War. Now we start again to make new distinctions between the different parts of our continent. Terms which I have frequently used in this book, such as Europe, the West or Western European, have here for the most part a global meaning only in contrast to words like Russia and Russian. As a Dutch historian I am well aware of the problems connected with the idea of Europe. Diversity far more than unity seems to be Europe's characteristic feature, and when words like Europe or European are used in a general way they always seem to imply generalisations which can only be justified to a certain extent. Perceptions of Russia of course also differed in different parts of Europe. But at the same time they had something in common which allowed this book to be one on European history.

Without the assistance of many people and institutions this book would never have been completed. In the original version of this book I thanked many Dutch friends and colleagues. In the English edition I want to express my appreciation for the help I got from abroad. I want to thank Terence Emmons for his warm hospitality and the staff of the Hoover Institution for its assistance in the early stage of my research. I am deeply grateful to Margaret Vaughan who made the English translation. I was greatly helped by the remarks, criticisms and corrections I received from Marc Raeff, Abraham Ascher, David Kirby and André Liebich. The translation of the Dutch text was financed by NWO, the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research. I want to pay homage to the late Anna M. Bourguina and the late Boris M. Sapir, both archivists of the Menshevik movement, who so kindly shared their knowledge and experience with me.