

RUSSIANS FIT BY CHARACTER FOR DEMOCRACY

Country Democratic Long Before Romanoff Tyranny, While Village Organizations Have Kept Spirit of Democracy Alive Under Autocracy—Self Control During Revolution

This is another of the series of articles by Charles Edward Russell, who has just returned from Russia, where he spent three months as a member of the official United States commission to the new Russian government.

(By Charles Edward Russell)
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One of the good strong reasons why we can expect the best from Russia is the Russian character.

After all, character tells the story—for men or for nations.

Strong characterized people, like the French, for instance, once they get hold upon democracy can never afterward be pried loose from it.

It is the same way about the Russians.

We all have a habit of thinking that the Russians have been plunged suddenly and without preparation into democracy, and don't know what to do with it.

We also have a notion that Russia has never known anything but autocracy, and the very worst of that.

Background Democratic.

We are wrong about both. The background of Russia is democratic; before the rise of old Michael, the tough old founder of the Romanoff house, there was as much democracy in Russia as there was at that in any other country of northern Europe.

In modern times the mur, or village organization of Russia, kept the spirit of democracy alive and gave it plenty of exercise under the very heel of the most vicious autocracy in the world.

It is a queer thing to think of, that while the tyrannical government and the marvelous police and spy systems were hunting out democracy high and low, the daily life of every village was fostering it and preparing the ability and skill that in the end pushed the old throne over and now conduct the national government.

I should think that this ought to be enough to convince even the Cave Men that democracy is ordained and inevitable.

The big things in a national character for democracy are a capacity for self-restraint and a capacity to work together.

Two Achievements Cited.

I will now point out two achievements of the Russians in self-restraint that I think are in their way unequalled in human affairs:

First—The old government of Russia was a horrible and beastly thing. It has never been painted as it really was, because there are some things you can't paint. It was cruel, blood-thirsty and savage. Every intelligent Russian outside of its circle hated it with fierce and reasonable hatred.

The time came when it fell and the people it had so terribly wronged stood over it, lying there helpless.

They could have done then to the former oppressors anything they pleased. They could have exacted a memorable revenge and history would have called it no more than justice.

They could have adorned every lamp post on the Nevsky with the body of some agent or member of the old machine, red with innocent blood.

They could have confiscated property; with perfect reason they could have tried for treason 20 men, high in the czar's confidence, and let the law take its course upon them.

The very least you could expect was exile for the men that had looted Russia and sent so many thousands to the living death of Siberia.

The Russian people did none of these things. They limited their revenge to the burning of police stations as a sign of protest against the hated police. When the hated police ceased to fight against the citizens and soldiers, their lives were spared.

A few of the first traitors were cast into prison. Nobody was put to death.

The czar, whose detestable character and appetite for cruelty had been responsible for Bloody Monday and other horrors, was put under a guard but not harmed.

Men whose brothers and sisters had rotted in the underground cells of Siberia and men whose mothers and sisters and wives had been shot down on Bloody Monday refused to seek the least revenge.

They were wise, they were humane,

and they never lost their bearings. They said: It is the system that we make war upon, not the individual.

Therefore they achieved their place in history with the least bloody and least cruel revolution ever known, and started democracy by abolishing the death penalty, establishing universal suffrage and standing for a practically universal amnesty.

I submit that the people capable of such things are perfectly capable of steering and maintaining their democracy, if they are allowed to have a fair chance at it.

People Keep Good Order.

Second—When the revolution broke the entire existing system of police and public order (so-called) slid into the discard. It just blew up, vanished and ceased to be, the whole thing, police, agents, spies, police courts, prosecutors, perjurers and the rest.

Well, imagine any great American city 24 hours without a police force or any other sign of government! What do you think would happen? New York, for instance; or Chicago. Suppose every policeman should be removed from Red Hook, or Coors' roost, and it should be some known that there were no more police courts and no police department? You would not care to promenade around those regions at night, would you? Nor in the day time, either.

But you could promenade around Petrograd or Moscow at any hour of the day or night, not a policeman in sight or within call, and be in perfect safety.

The people went about their business with perfect order and composure. Without any compulsion they respected one another's rights. Without police supervision they supervised themselves.

On Sunday, July 1, I saw in Petrograd 500,000 men and women "demonstrating" in the streets, which means they marched with bands and banners and held meetings and heard oratory.

No Rioting or Ruin.

Reactionaries had predicted that when all these low, common people should be turned loose, riot, raving and ruin would be inevitable. There wasn't enough disturbance anywhere to disturb your grandmother's nap. The low, common people proved to be exceedingly intelligent, well behaved, quiet and orderly, and their meetings produced oratory of which any nation might be proud. You will not find such speakers in the American congress nor the British parliament.

No, the world need not fear that these people do not know what to do with their liberty. They know well enough. The only question is whether they are to have any liberty.

And that depends in a large measure upon how soon the United States can get ready with its mightiest wallop.

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