

Saints and Barbarians*

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Two forms of sensibility reach us from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and impinge on our culture. I deplore the first; I rejoice in the second. Sensibility for me means ways of apprehending things and putting a value on them — the kind of notion implied in Matthew Arnold's description of the ideal critic as a man "of common sense and uncommon sensibility".

The late and much-lamented Hugh Seton-Watson wrote towards the end of his life that the proper definition of what Europe stands for in our time is European culture — not Christianity, not power, but an indivisible European culture; culture, moreover, in T.S. Eliot's sense of the word rather than the one used by anthropologists. I believe this to be true, but if so, it is important that we should examine the influences that now shape this culture. The two forms of sensibility emanating from Eastern Europe are two such influences.

The first of these may be described as one generated by a wholly materialistic conception of life in a totalitarian or near-totalitarian environment and in geographic isolation. It expresses itself in a variety of forms — some spectacular, others subliminal but no less important.

We can hardly spend half an hour with recent arrivals from the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe without being made aware that they have brought with them a truncated or indeed grotesque idea of what education is about. The independent study of the classics, philosophy, history and even literary culture have been so drastically cut back or forced into conformity with the prevailing ideology that generations of men and women have grown up in these countries to whom the familiar reference points in European thinking and sensibility mean nothing.

They are ignorant of Western languages, of the Bible, Homer, Tacitus, Virgil; of the thinkers and poets of Humanism, of the Renaissance and the Reformation. I have met modern Russian writers who were unfamiliar with the names of Yeats, Rilke and Silone. I

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could go on. What these people have in common is a selective conception of our civilisation. The worthwhile sections of the human story start for them with the second half of the 19th century or indeed the Soviet period. They have been excluded or, in some cases, have excluded themselves from the consciousness of the past and cannot, therefore, speak to us in the authentic accents of the present. They suffer from historical amnesia, which is another way of saying that they are barbarians.

I am, of course, not saying that this form of sensibility reaches us with the same force from, shall we say, Poland and Hungary as it does from the Soviet Union, nor am I saying that matters are not rapidly changing under Gorbachev. But the corruption exists on a wide enough scale to inhibit the sensibilities and subvert the languages of the nations affected and the whole of European culture.

A common sensibility is a rare gift in human affairs. It is being eroded in Western Europe, too, although under a different set of circumstances. I find this erosion just as reprehensible, but less menacing for the future of our civilisation. We do have, under democratic government, the means to counteract it if we have the courage to do so. It is much more difficult, indeed it has so far proved impossible, to stop it under the Leninist dispensation.

Another aspect of the baneful impact of a purely materialistic conception of life in a totalitarian environment is the spread of an "all entitlements — no duties" kind of attitude to the community. This, of course, has its Western counterpart, too, well known to us in this country. But under communist governments it springs from the fact that the ordinary people have never accepted the legitimacy of communist rule. They have isolated themselves from its ideology and are sceptical about its policies. More particularly, they do not share the state's conception of what constitutes the "public good". Indeed they tend to look upon it as the "enemy good" from which it is as permissible to take as it is foolish to contribute to.

There is, of course, much to be said for frustrating the Leninist conception of public good, but being forced to do so over a long period of time breeds certain tendencies in human behaviour that are damaging to the good of the individual and the national culture as well. In Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union it has promoted low cunning and the mindless pursuit of self-interest as collective virtues, the social acceptability of pilfering, cheating and deceit, and a tacit sense of general lawlessness as responses to the legalised lawlessness of unelected governments.

The emergence of the ignorant, grabbing, totally utilitarian, amoral individual — the emergence, in other words, of an unforeseen but devastating variant of Soviet Man — is a menace not only to the

system that produced it, but to the moral health of all of us. It cannot be a matter of indifference for Englishmen, Frenchmen or Italians whether the baker in Kiev or the bus driver in Prague, with whom we share this small promontory of the Euroasian landmass, shares or does not share our ideas of what constitutes right and wrong; of what means of persuasion are legitimate between man and man; and of what things are, or are not, of good report in our culture. When such premisses are no longer held in common, our continent can no longer hold together, any more than a marriage can in which parents have ceased to agree on what benefits and what harms the education of their children. The main threat of communism today is not the military threat, nor even the threat of subversion, although that is real enough, but the hooliganisation of our spiritual stock and the relativisation of our values.

Let me hasten to add: we in this country are not in a strong position to inveigh against these deficiencies, because the vandalism and violence that have spread over Britain in the last two decades shame us into admitting that our own ability to deal with certain social challenges has also been found wanting. Yet, let me stress it again: in a free democracy these degradations of man and his community are open to correction because they are not central to the nature of democratic society. In the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, they flow from the essence of the system. There is no moral equivalence between the two. The man not least affected by the collapse of values in the Soviet population is Mikhail Gorbachev. He realises that even his modest reforms (modest by our standards, not by those of the Soviet Union) cannot be made to bite as long as the corrosion continues in the minds of individual Soviet men and women. His daily exhortation to the people, "restructure yourselves", shows him to be a reformer in more senses than one.

Propagandists of the Communist Party have long maintained that the corruptions of Soviet society are due to the remnants of bourgeois-capitalistic influences or their renewed intrusion. But quite recently they have been joined by independent and indeed profoundly hostile critics of the system who are saying something rather similar, although their language is different. This should give us pause. Some, especially in Poland and Hungary, ascribe the vulgarisation of their culture, the impoverishment of taste and the degeneration of morality to the arrival, under *glasnost*, of the junk-culture of the West and the depredations of our entertainment industry. There is an element of truth in their charges. The novelty value of what was previously forbidden literature, forbidden music and forbidden clothing has been profound. Added to the existing indigenous corruptions, they have helped to bring forth the unlovely characters of the Soviet punk and

the Soviet yobbo. We can now see them in the Soviet media working their disgust with the system, their elders, military service, poverty or bad luck into lyrics reminiscent of the creations of their unlovely brothers in London and New York.

Yet these imports from the West merely add to the vacuousness of popular culture under Marxism-Leninism — they do not explain it. Responsibility lies with an ideology that defines the motivations and ends of human endeavour in one-dimensional terms and utilitarian language. One need not entirely agree with Dostoyevsky's "If there is no God — everything is permitted", and yet say that communism of the Soviet type is now dying of self-suffocation because it has refused to recognise the numinous element in the nature of man. The cultural barbarian is a fitting expression of 70 years of Leninist rule.

There is, happily, also a second influence reaching us from the Eastern parts of Europe. It is completely at variance with the one I have attempted to describe; it injects that numinous element into our civilisation that Marxism-Leninism denies. It is brought to us by men and women of the calibre of Pasternak, Shostakovich, Sinyavsky, Solzhenitsyn, Maximov, Irina Ratushinskaya, Koryagin, Bukovsky, Father Pöpieluszko, Janos Pilinszky, Hungarian, Polish and Russian film makers and a whole spectrum of minor figures in the churches, in the arts and literature. Their message to us is about the spiritual nature of man and culture. They, and their forerunners who perished in the camps and cellars of the NKVD, have furnished our civilisation with examples that are denied us in the less challenging climate of liberal-democratic societies.

Clearly, these were and are exceptional characters. They had the strength to resist repression and turn suffering to good account. For me, they represent the partial fulfilment of a book I read as a student in the early 1940s, Walter Schubart's *Europa und die Seele des Ostens*, in which the distinguished Swiss scholar predicted the rise, under the hammer-blows of communism, of the influence of Russian Christianity and its impact on Western culture. Mind you, the numinous influence that is now reaching us from the East is not all Christian, nor is it always imbued with the sense of mission and prophecy that we detect in the writings of Solzhenitsyn. But it almost always imparts an exceptionally heightened sensibility that is as close to religious experience as most ordinary people are likely to attain both in the East and West of Europe. I am not advocating it as a substitute for religion, but it does represent a mode of feeling and being that is an antidote to barbarism.

Malcolm Muggeridge once observed that the priestly estate is an indispensable component of every civilisation and especially of those civilisations that have ceased to be guided by religion. In every human

community, he argued, there have to be men and women who divorce themselves from the daily commerce of living and dedicate their lives to contemplation and the matters of the spirit.

It seems to me that that priestly function is now being performed for our own increasingly post-Christian civilisation by these special ambassadors of a more numinous self-understanding. I would not like to say whether the Russian or Polish nation has been appointed by destiny to be the "Messiah-people" to save the rest of Christendom through its suffering — as many Poles and Russians believed in the 19th century and some still do. But it is certainly true that they have, through these exceptional men and women, fashioned their ordeal into an influence that makes us marvel, and that we would do well to embrace.

My story demonstrates a remarkable symmetry. The same Marxist-Leninist system that has inflicted so much carnage and bred the types of men who are now a menace to our civilisation as well as to the Soviet system itself has also done something else. It has, through the very hardships of the forced march it imposed on the people, made certain sensitive men and women — predominantly Russian men and women — think long and hard about the human condition. Their voices come to us *de profundis* and should help us to redress some of the shallowness of our own lives.