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The Russian Countryside from Tsarist times to the Fall of the Soviet Empire

Schemann, S. 1997¹ *Echoes of a Native Land. Two Centuries of a Russian Village*. London: Vintage/Anchor Books, pp. 350.

This book presents the history of the Russian countryside using the example of the village of Koltsovo in the region of Kaluga in central Russia, at the crossroads of two epochs: Tsarist times, the Bolshevik revolution and Soviet rule. This is the family village of the author's parents and grandparents. It is worth reading not only because the changes in the Russian countryside are not very well known but also due to the proximity and many similarities with the Central European countryside. This is an extensive socio-historical reportage, thoroughly investigated by a New York Times correspondent: a Russian, born and educated in the West to a family of White Russians – émigrés, and who speaks fluent Russian. His method of collecting data can be described as typical for cultural anthropologists and hence his extended stays in the research location², close contacts with the population and carrying out interviews with them, the use of all available written sources (archives, letters, photographs) and participation in local events or ceremonies. Moreover, the author complements his method with the diary of his grandfather, Nicolas Michailovich Osorgin, a landowner from Koltsovo. The diary is a point of reference for the author's observations or a point of reference to the problems

¹ Although in principle we try to publish elaborations about the latest books (i.e. which have appeared no later than two years before the year of publication of our issue), we are here making an exception. Firstly, because, although the book appeared over ten years ago, it is hardly known to readers in Central and Eastern Europe. Secondly, the events reflected and sociologically interpreted in these 350 pages seem to be a perfect complement to the most recent research on the Russian countryside concerning the first decade of the 20th century which we have the opportunity to present in our periodical.

² From 1.01.1980 to 31.12.1985 and from 1.01.1991 to April 1995

he examines. His grandfather's diary is kept systematically and contains notes of events from Tsarist times, the years of the Bolshevik revolution and also the beginnings of Soviet rule.

What stands out in the diary is the idyllic manorial life of the Russian countryside, which harmonizes with both patriotism and attachment to the Tsarist dynasty as well as, much as in the whole of Central and Eastern Europe, the infirm socio-political realism of this stratum, resulting largely from the isolation of the manor from the peasant village and life in large towns. News of the murder of Nicolas II was an enormous shock to the owners of Koltsovo (to the peasant village too) all the more so since it was unexpected. Yet the first democratic revolution (Kierenski's) was equally unexpected and the second was even more so although worrying symptoms had appeared earlier. The author quotes a characteristic letter in his grandfather's diary from front-line Russian soldiers in 1917 to the school children in Koltsovo who on the initiative of Nicolas Michailovich, the local Orthodox priest and teacher sent Easter parcels to the soldiers on the front: "We thank you for remembering us, separated from our families by the decision of the hateful government. But now we have freedom. Children, remember that is a great thing. There are no more masters, landowners or proprietors. Value this freedom and make full use of it". That thank-you letter was no doubt written at the bidding of revolutionary agitators already active in the Tsarist army.

The correct addressee of that letter, Nicolas Michailovich Osorgin was a socially sensitive landowner for those times. He not only took part in the village religious life, yet also supported the parish school and even intended handing over part of his land via the bank to the peasant collective which did not in fact work out due to the bureaucratic rules of the Stolypin reform. Perhaps that was why during the stormy Bolshevik events the local peasants did not attack his manor, which he lived in with his family until expropriation in 1923. They neither robbed nor killed anyone and even provided him and his family with protection during their escape to Moscow. And yet..., more about that below. Whereas the fact that those young people, whom Nicolas Michailovich had sensitised to local social matters, were the first to become young communist activists, can be considered a bitter result of his idealistic activity.

The author devotes a lot of space to the backwardness of the Russian countryside. He mentions the commonly applied former tillage system which had disappeared in Western Europe soon after the Middle Ages, poor and often dirty huts, the population's illiteracy (during the pre-soviet period) yet he also writes about the communists' ambitious plans of "catching up" with the

West, which in his opinion, did not succeed. He pays considerable attention to the terror applied by the Soviet authorities. Potential enemies were spotted in everybody and everywhere, initially in people with the “wrong” class background, then also in those with the “right” background, yet provoking suspicion either due to a certain intellectual independence, a careless expression or publicly pronounced questions which were too “casual” or jokes with a political undertone. Work well carried out or professional qualifications were insignificant. Arrests often took place in the street, on leaving work or in so-called “home traps” of unexpected guests. The families of the arrested were not informed as a matter of principle.

In this way George O., the author’s distant cousin, gets arrested, because he happened to go to an abode where a trap had been planted and was banished to the gulag not only for his background and hostility towards the “new” but also because he did not conceal his religious beliefs during the inquiry. Later, during a repressive action carried out in the camp he gets executed with a group of fellow prisoners: they all go to their death singing a religious hymn. Similarly, a qualified chemist, working in the laboratory of a clandestine NKVD factory (!), disappears one fine day after refusing to carry out experiments on prisoners instead of apes.

However, referring to conversations with his respondents, the author raises an important issue: psychological inhibitions – even during the times of glasnost. His respondents do not want to talk about the dark sides of the Soviet regime, their own tragedies or those of their relatives or friends. “Silence became habit”, writes the author. One may ask, whether that general conspiracy of silence did not become second nature to the *homo sovieticus*? The respondents do remember and willingly recall their youth, studies, the battle with rural illiteracy, social and political work and even the years of widespread famine in the Soviet Union!

Yet the reader may ask whether this denial of an important part of their lives from their consciousness is not a form of self defence of their peace of mind in old age, which would be an indication of egoism of those who managed to survive the terror and who currently want to take advantage – without having a bad conscience – of social advancement thanks to the Soviet regime? Particularly if it meant accepting the evil of the time or even worse, participating in it?

However, it does happen that someone suddenly “opens up” to the author, such as Nadieżda L., who after a few meetings with him spotted him in the local media! Being an inhabitant of Koltsovo and the daughter of an Orthodox

priest, currently a retired teacher caring for the local museum (obviously founded here by the Soviet authorities, just like the local technical college!), she resembles many of the author's respondents, an example of a strange mixture of attitudes. She lovingly remembers her father, the Orthodox priest who provided her with a happy childhood (before 1914), while also proudly showing off her party membership card, acquired for her bad social background as late as 1952. Having been a former member of the youth movement she takes pride in her social activity which does, of course, have a political undercurrent; yet she now goes to the Orthodox church and again declares being a believer. When talking about her family's tragic destiny (her brother who was a doctor in the gulag, sent to the front during the Finnish-Soviet war), and almost all her friends, she justifies the authorities (!), because they achieved an enormous goal: the creation of a better world and that required victims! She lists the successes of that regime: doing away with illiteracy, massive communist buildings, the first man in space and last but not least, victory over the Germans, which integrated the nation. The last fact is considered by the author as the real, single success of Soviet Russia. But, he asks consciously, did the other successes justify so many costs and such a vast number of victims?

Of course, he does not reply to this question because he cannot do so without comparing Soviet successes and the social costs with analogical ones in the democratic countries of the West, which he does not do. And the author's next question: does the departing generation of Russians, which experienced the Bolshevik revolution and civil war, political purges and horrific terror, famine, kolkhozes and gulags as well as the 2nd World War not merit, if not our sympathy, then at least preferential judgement, given that pipe dreams and social delusions die all the harder, the more victims they demand? Perhaps that was why opposition towards communism grew weaker in Russia and in Russia nowadays communism does not meet as decisive condemnation as it does in Koltsovo.

A last attempt at peaceful protest took place here in the 1930s, mainly on the part of women and that was in defence of the Orthodox church and religious values, yet when collectivisation was resumed in the village, the peasant men, as was later the case in Poland, were more passive not only in fear of greater repression than in the case of the protesting women but because a growing number of them commuted to work in the nearby town, thus only partly living in their own village.

The reader of this book may ask yet another question: did the significant differences in living standards and quality between the peasant population and

the inhabitants of the manor not contribute to the inadequate resistance in this ethnically pure Russian village, and of a relatively quick social acceptance of “pipe dreams and delusions” and hence utopia?.. Did that population, while casually watching the interior of the Osorgin manor during the revolution, not by chance have similar thoughts and feelings as did the Celts or Franks, when taking over the abandoned villas of Roman citizens while the Empire was falling? For the Koltsovians that manor could appear as a fairytale palace with objects, children’s toys which they had neither seen nor could they ever have guessed their purpose. Did that not make it easier for the Bolsheviks and their populist propaganda which referred to man’s negative feelings? It is here worth recalling the words of Józef Piłsudski in his conversation with the representative of “White” Russia (general Wrangel) general P. Machrov who went to Warsaw unofficially in September 1920 (quoted after Professor A. Nowak, *Historie politycznych tradycji*, The History of political traditions 2007 p. 237): *...I went to many towns and villages, which had previously been under Bolshevik rule. People became animals battling for a mouthful of bread; in the former wealthy Russia, which had fed the whole of Europe – famine, murrain, filth, deprivation and poverty. Not only living people are dying but so are objects.. And yet there are Russians, many of them, who are following the Bolsheviks. I do not believe that they are only being chased by machine guns, there are other motives here too. I am sure that the people are afraid – do you know what they are afraid of? Marshal Piłsudski said pausing for a moment, They are afraid of the return of privileges with which one class of people dominated another.*

And the thought that in the new social order things can be worse than in the previous one, does not worry those who currently feel disabled by destiny or simply socially unappreciated. They will easily believe the promises made by populists who simply say what they want to hear and what satisfies their secret dreams, even though their historical experience which they do not know anyway, proves the contrary: after revolution, during a dictatorship, the majority of society after a brief period of euphoria lives worse than in the past and when the leaders eventually try to improve the shortcomings or reform the authoritarian system, dictatorship weakens and collapses, giving in, at least in passing to even further deterioration. That is what happened in the Russian countryside after the reforms of Gorbachov and Yeltsin!

The kolkhozes visited by the author are a picture of deprivation and despair. Of 340 kolkhozes in the region (*oblast*) of Kaluga, only 24 are not in deficit. Whoever has the possibility, runs away from them; those who remain are elderly or sick people, women with small children and... drunkards. On

one of them the author heard the roaring of cows which had not been milked for a couple of days, and the only milking machine on the spot (the others had “disappeared”) had stopped working in accordance with the rules and regulations. This reminds the author of a report made by a certain American rural sociologist of Czech descent about a visit to a kolkhoz in Czechoslovakia. The Czech “members of cooperatives” presented him with an illustration of the differences between capitalist agriculture before the war and socialist agriculture: in the former, when a storm approached, everybody ran out of their houses into the fields to gather the crops; in the latter, everybody runs away from the field into their houses.

During the Yeltsin reform only a few people took over kolkhoz land in order to farm it individually. In the region of Kaluga the same was done by 27 people who were all from towns (having completed agricultural studies; does that mean an end to the traditional countryside?) The author wonders why the kolkhoz people in Koltsovo or other villages in the region did not want to turn to individual farming? Mainly for financial reasons (the lack of a market or loans for private farmers, lack of fertilizers and seeds for sowing, suitable machinery or difficulties in dividing the kolkhoz land in relation to its varied quality etc.) But the author believes that psychological barriers may be more important: the fear of losing collective support and security as well as fear of taking personal risk. In other words, the disappearance of the capitalist spirit of enterprise? A similar phenomenon emerged in Poland during the first half of the 19th century during attempts of changing serfdom into rentification, providing more opportunities for individual wealth. And the current kolkhoz farmers in Koltsovo, as in other Russian villages, showed admirable diligence on their private plots beside the kolkhozes (!) which often misled western Sovietologists in their deliberations on the future of the Russian countryside.

Communism did, of course, debilitate the peasants’ (here using the traditional name, because “peasants” as a profession and specific way of life have disappeared in Russia) spirit of capitalism, but most of them are unafraid of hard work or effort, which can be witnessed by the food production on their plots. So their unwillingness to run their own farms is not only due to the Soviet authorities persecuting all forms of individual farming initiative and aiming at private profit, but also or above all – according to the author – out of fear of leaving the collective, which would mean being against the principle of “egalitarianism” and in favour of liberalism and the free market. This matter goes further. According to the competent diagnosis of Professor Janusz

Czapliński (*Diagnoza społeczna* Social Diagnosis 2007. Report) about 80% of the respondents in an all-Poland survey were in favour of “egalitarianism” in socio-economic life!, although in practice not having another alternative, they adapt to free market principles. We do not know similar research in present-day Russia, but probably the index is analogical, if not higher.

The author notes a characteristic answer of one of the local kolkhoz people: *I may belong to the baron, but the land belongs to me*, which may express agreement for either the patronage of unpopular landowners or rather the welfare state which is more successful in ensuring that egalitarianism.. Whereas the director of the local kolkhoz states: we work inefficiently, we live poorly, we lose our money, yet at least we manage to keep the collective going.

Examples of human solidarity mentioned by the author are, of course, a different matter: on the whole, Koltsovians do not obey recommendations made by the Soviet authorities, not to show sympathy even from a distance to displaced landowners; one of the peasants hitherto considered hostile towards the manor, pressed 25 roubles secretly into the pocket of the displaced landowner Osorgin; whereas later, during the famine in Russia, some village inhabitants sent food parcels to the exiled landowners, living outside Moscow, explaining: “first you fed us, now we feed you”. These are facts which are signs of Christian sympathy towards those who are currently harmed. Yet such feelings cannot counteract the blatant, lasting social inequality and subjective injustice. A reflection here comes to mind: human solidarity can and should be developed in the name of social peace and peace of mind, strengthened with appropriate education and social policy; it can however, as the Soviet example shows, also be weakened, yet it cannot be totally eliminated from our lives. That seems impossible.

And another reflection: skilfully presented and exaggerated class differences which appealed to man’s negative instincts were decisive in the political success of the Bolsheviks. Examples of empathy and classless solidarity, sometimes moving, did not have, as it appears, greater significance in the political battle for power; although they could, but did not have to, sometimes relieve them, which is socially not without significance.

The author tries to present the course of events in Russia during the past 100 years within categories of a traditional conflict between supporters of the West and Slavophiles, two Russian cultural models. The fall of the Soviet Union, much like other historical events in that country would therefore, be a result of conflict between the democratic supporters of the West and of a free market, and nationalist Slavophiles, searching for a feeling of identity

in the collective. And according to the author, that which came from western Marxism will perish in Russia whereas communism as a form of collective spirit “will remain in the heart of the Russian nation”! And when Anglo-Saxons continue to use the pronoun “I”, the Russians use the pronoun “we”; and about those in government they will always say “they” in accordance with Euro-Asiatic tradition. And here the author quotes a characteristic fragment from an article in a local Soviet newspaper after the dissolution of the Soviet Union: “there were 1500 of us Party members, there are now 45, yet we will continue to fight that our country returns to socialism and to drum into the population the real democracy and justice”. Yet another example of a strange mixture of ideas!

Acknowledging certain successes of the Soviet Empire thanks to the highly police controlled state, the author makes a type of balance sheet of the advantages and costs of communism: it promised the creation of a “new Soviet man” unselfishly devoted to the common good, and it led to the crushing of initiative and spirit of the nation; it announced a new humanitarian ideology and in its name murdered 10 million of its own citizens; it spread out a vision of the planned economy to the citizens where nothing would be left to chance, and created a horrific bureaucracy which eventually stifled the economy; it promised peace and freedom and created the most militarised and absolute police state in the world; it promised the development of national culture and created an anti-culture where mediocrity was prized and talents were unscrupulously destroyed; and finally it promised a new happy life and created an unspeakably sad and polluted society, financially poor, deprived of both initiative and spirit. And when the masses stood queuing or swilled down vodka, the elite raised corruption to the peaks, while ensuring privileges for itself (e.g. modern hospitals hidden – from the ordinary people – behind curtains). However, although critical of the Soviet system, he refers to the Russian people with considerable affinity despite their faults.