IMAGINING RUSSIA—AS RUSSIA?

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Imagining Russia as other than Russia is something that the intellectual and political world has been doing for centuries. To a degree, imagining Russia is analogous to the parable of the blind man and the elephant. How Russia is imagined depends on who is doing the imagining, what facet of Russia is being imagined—and when.

Intermittently, during the past millennium Russia has been imagined as Oriental, most often akin to the "murderous" Turk variety. With the ascension of Peter the Great, Russia began to be seen as European, albeit somewhat backward European. Peter's turn to the West—his establishment of a new capital, support of language training, science and education in general—created the image of a swiftly modernizing Russia Catherine's subsequent cultivation of liberalism and widely advertised pandering to the the philosophes furthered the image of a Russia quickly falling into line with a modernizing Europe. That the overwhelming mass of its inhabitants were peasants deeply ensconced in feudalism and scarcely touched by the winds of change was largely unheeded.

In the early XIXc., the image of a European Russia was supplanted by that of another Russia—anti-modern, Oriental again—but far more threatening than the pre-Petrine Turk imagery, because it had inserted itself into the political and cultural heart of the continent. As the tsar's soldiers pursued Napoleon's Grand Armee

across Poland and Germany and into France, Europe's crowned heads regardless of whom they had supported in the wars, were seized by the terror of an overwhelming barbaric, force—the original "Red Fear." Metternich and Talleyrand's primary diplomatic objective became removing and keeping Russia out of Europe. Nicholas I's rejection/suppression of nominally liberalizing revolutions in Greece, Poland and Hungary reinforced the image of a Russian bogeyman. De Custin's widely circulated description of Russia as a giant prison, too backwards to absorb the high European civilization, further shaped the dark imaging of Russia.

In the middle of the XIXc., Russia's defeat in the Crimean War greatly weakened the obsessive fear of Russia that had dominated European politics in the first half of the century. Europe's first political concern now became Germany, no longer Russia. Russia was now needed to help fend off the threatening Hohenzolleren ambitions. These changed circumstances, accompanied by the wide-ranging, though still inadequate reforms of Alexander II, the "Tsar Reformer," resurrected the image of a Russia in the European tradition.

The so-called emancipation of the serfs in 1861, the opening of the country to foreign capital and banking and industrial development, the October Manifesto and the Duma strengthened the impression that Russia was to be considered a full-fledged member of the league of European monarchs.

The impression of a mainstream European Russia was further strengthened in the later part of the XIX and early XXcs. by the emergence of major Russian cultural talent:Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, the most outstanding among literally scores of Russian writers who grabbed the attention of Europe's reading public; Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-

Korsakov, Stravinsky in music; Fokine, Najinsky and Pavlova in ballet. And while Kandinsky and Chagall would not begin to attract attention until the eve of World War I. their advent was forecast by the works of numerous talented predecessors. Russia was in the forefront of the European arts. While that meant nothing to the tens of millions of Russian peasants, still under the yoke of serfdom in spite of 1861, it meant a great deal to Western European opinion leaders imagining Russia. It led some to conclude that Russia was not only in the European tradition but at its head culturally.

Those who followed the arts were not the only ones who saw Russia not as a laggard, but as a creative leader of society. In Russia, the majority of the increasing number of those who had discovered socialism became convinced that Russia could more easily attain that state than other countries, because it already had the fore-runner of "socialism" in the shape of the feudal Mir; which with its emphasis on sharing and equality established the basis for an easy transition to a higher social stage,thus escaping the preliminary stages described by Marx. Russia was not only in the Western tradition. It was out in front as leader.

The October Revolution created rival images of Russia. On the one hand, Soviet Russia was imagined to be the wave of the future. "I have seen the future—and it works," said Lincoln Steffens. Communism was seen as the culmination of the liberal dream—and it was happening first in Russia The revolution was supposed to be international, but when it did not spread, the hopes of those who dreamed of a communist future became identified with Russia where the future actually was happening. A large share of the world's population imagined Russia as the bright tomorrow. The depression that Russia

escaped and the role that communism-identified-with-Russia assumed as the leader in the struggle against fascism only heightened the image of Russia as a beacon for all mankind.

But simultaneously another image of Russia was impinging itself on the world's consciousness—and that was of the "evil empire," the foe of freedom, the destroyer of independent nations, the enemy of the good. De Custine's image of Russia was intensified enormously. For decades in the late XXc., the "gulag", the slave labor camp, became the predominating imagining of Russia.

When Soviet Russia collapsed, still another image of Russia emerged, particularly in the United States, that of a country hungering for the democratic institutions of the West, eager to drop its old ways and to adopt the civil society that had become the signpost of civilization. But like all the other images of Russia, that, too, has been abandoned, and more rapidly than most. It has not yet been replaced, except by notions of chaos, and that image is more likely to be enduring than its immediate predecessor.

Some of the imaginings of Russia during this past millennium have lasted longer than others, but none have endured for the most part because they have been unidimensional, emphasizing a single facet of Russia, to the exclusion of others that, though they may have been recessive for the time being, have nonetheless been stubbornly present. Russia has been, and is, simultaneously, Oriental, European, progressive, immovable, millennial and damnable, fraternal and hostile, in a mixture uniquely its own.. Aspects of it may be somewhat better comprehended by comparing

them with similar organizations and functions in other countries, but such comparisons tell only part of the story, because Russia's size, major role in world history and experiences make her unique and complicated, and she can best be comprehended as a whole and not by grasping a tusk here or a leg or trunk there, and then proclaiming that part to be the whole.