

Liberal Russia—by Theodore Roosevelt

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THE great democratic revolution in Russia was successfully carried through just before the United States entered into the war on the side of the Allies against the ruthless oligarchic militarism of Prussianized Germany. We of America hailed this event as of the highest importance. It has put all the great democracies of the world on the same side in this war for freedom against despotism.

At the outset of the war the sympathies of the liberal and radical—indeed, all of the forward-looking—people in this country naturally went out to the Allies as the champions of Belgium, of the liberties of small well-behaved nations, and of democracy. There was much hesitation as regards Russia. Our people had from of old a most kindly feeling for Russia. We admired her vastness, her power, and the many fine and high qualities of her people. We paid great heed to the Russian writers and to the philosophy they taught. We believed that Russia and the United States ought naturally to be friends and mutual supporters. But we had been for many years puzzled and repelled by the Russian bureaucracy and aristocracy and by the war waged by them on the smaller nationalities of the Russian empire and on liberals generally.

SOME of the things done at the outset of the war helped to allay, and others helped to inflame, these impressions. The first proclamation about the liberties of Poland was most satisfactory. But the treatment not only of the Poles, but of the Jews, and of the Uniate Catholics and Finns was anything but satisfactory. There seemed danger of the victory of mere absolutism and intolerance.

Gradually, however, it became evident that the liberals were gaining the upper hand. The Duma became more and more a directing power. It grew steadily more evident that the Russians regarded this as a people's war, as the war of all the people of Holy Russia; and there were strong symptoms that the Russian people were becoming more determined to secure not only their own liberties but the liberties of all the other and lesser nationalities and creeds of their vast empire—Finns, Poles, Jews, Uniates, and men of the mountain regions south of the Black Sea.

A proof of this was furnished a year ago by the speech in the Council of the Upper Chamber of the Duma, delivered by Baron Rosen, formerly Russian Ambassador at Washington, a most able and very just and liberal man. Indeed, the speech itself furnished proof of the superior freedom enjoyed by reformers in Russia as compared with Germany even at that time; for most certainly no such speech as that made by Baron Rosen, with its straightforward plea for the good treatment of the smaller nationalities, without regard to creed, would have been permitted in the German Parliament.

The speech runs in part as follows—it is a remarkable speech, and a long extract is justified:

"Aside all political, economic and psychological motives, the deep significance of the conflict before us, and of the unshakable resolution of the Allies to fight to a finish against Germany's desire to dominate by brutal force the whole world, is the conviction rooted in the public mind that the German doctrine of 'Might is Right' constitutes the gravest danger to the human race, and cannot be tolerated.

"In such a just cause the whole civilized world should have been on the side of the Allies, to say nothing of countries geographically so situated that they are in danger of having to share the fate of brave and hapless Belgium. Why is it, then, that in reality their attitude is somewhat different? It is undoubtedly in our power to remove one of the causes which make the public opinion in neutral

countries hesitate about taking up an attitude favorable to us.

"In this struggle against German Imperialism and Absolutism for Right and Justice, for the freedom and independence of the smaller nations, we fight hand-in-hand with the most advanced peoples in Europe, and we cannot win the sympathy of the civilized world unless we bring our internal front, so to speak, on a level with the political ideas of our valiant allies, and apply them in the administration of our border provinces and in the government of the nationalities forming part of the population of Russia.

"There are two diametrically opposed methods of government. One is the method adopted by our allies. Its results were seen in the enthusiastic outbursts of patriotism throughout the self-governing British Colonies, and even among the non-English elements—the Irish, French-Canadians, Boers and Indians. They all rushed to the defense of the British Empire. Thanks to this method of government it was possible for England to entrust the chief command of the troops in South Africa to that very general who, sixteen years ago, led the Boers against the English, and who is now Prime Minister of British South Africa.

"The other method is that of the Germans. They have applied it to the population of Posen, Schleswig, Alsace and Lorraine, with the result that even the pure German portion of the population of Alsace retained its passionate attachment for France, who never treated them as second-rate citizens, or as possible traitors of their country.

Now, at last, we can say that this war is everywhere a war not only for right against wrong, for civilization against military barbarism, but for democracy against absolutism.

"In our policy toward our border provinces, and toward the so-called non-Russian nationalities, we have, to the greatest detriment of the real interests of Russia, followed closely the German system of government. We have even improved upon it by an addition of medieval religious intolerance. People may say that war is decided by military power and not by the degree of sympathy which neutral countries may show for the home policy of this or that State. The German Government obviously regards the question in a different light, or else it would not be spending millions on propaganda in all the countries, even the remotest in the world. Not only do we not counteract this propaganda, but by our domestic policy we supply our enemies with weapons with which to set against us the public opinion of such countries as the United States of America—the only great neutral power—and our neighbor, Sweden. It is inconceivable that those who guide our home policy should not be able to realize that by our medieval treatment of the Jewish population of Russia, and by our systematic outrages upon the constitutional habit of mind of the Finnish people, we are helping enormously the pro-German propaganda in neutral countries which our enemies carry on with lavish means to the detriment of the cause of the Allies. The question is, why has not our Government settled these questions once and for all, as it did—alas, so late—the question of Polish autonomy? The only answer is that our Government did not wish to renounce a traditional policy so dear to the hearts of our militant Nationalists.

"It is therefore incumbent upon the Legislative Chambers to assist the Government in this matter, and to introduce bills abolishing all the restrictive laws against the Jews, and cancelling the law of July 17 concerning Finland.

"Such measures would undoubtedly facilitate the task of the Government in international matters, and would meet with the lively appreciation of our valiant allies.

"We must bear in mind that this great European War is not only a conflict of interests, but also of ideas and principles. In fighting against German militarism, Russia is taking her stand on the side of those who fight for the triumph of the idea of Right and Freedom, and it is necessary that no more shall there be people in Russia oppressed or deprived of their rights."

This was a brave, straightforward and statesmanlike plea for human rights, for civil justice and religious liberty. Delivered by such a man, in such a place, it was of striking significance. We felt that it should command our hearty sympathy; and that, if the principles it laid down were accepted and acted on by the Russian Government, the last lingering suspicion of Russia entertained by the American people would vanish.

But immediately afterward there came signs of an evident reaction toward despotism in Russia. The German influence, always on the side of autocracy, strengthened. It was announced that Baron Rosen had been dismissed from the appointive Upper Council. It looked as if the reactionaries had the upper hand, and as if Russia might range herself with the powers of darkness.

THEN came the revolution; thank Heaven, hither to a bloodless revolution of singular moderation. All friends of orderly liberty breathed a great sigh of relief. We most earnestly hope that the sinister extremists, always associated with any revolution, will not gain control. The socialistic ultra-radicals are pacifists, and, in a sense, even pro-Germans, and it would be ruinous if they wrested control from the moderates. If Russia achieved as free a government as England now has, she would indeed be fortunate. Either anarchy or socialism in Russia is the handmaiden of tyranny and herald of reaction. Bloodshed and violence would be ruinous to that great democratic advance which we hail with such joy.

We of the United States most earnestly wish well to Russia. We believe that she has before her a career of really stupendous greatness. We believe that the good she can do mankind will be incalculable if she acts in the spirit of broad humanity outlined and forecasted in the speech of Baron Rosen. When this is done, hearty goodwill toward Russia will not be marred by any feeling that to other races or creeds Orthodox Russia refuses to grant the liberty she demands for herself. The Protestant Finn and the Catholic Pole, the Christian Armenian (whose creed and race are alike of hoary antiquity) and the Ruthenian Uniate Catholics will all be fairly and justly treated. All of them need such treatment.

But it is the Jews who need it most. Of all the suffering peoples in Europe, the Jews on the eastern war frontier have probably suffered most—they have suffered almost as much as the Armenians in Turkey and as the Syrian Christians. If Russia will now in good faith undertake to do them justice, she will not only benefit them and render a service to Russia itself, but she will confer a great boon on all humanity—for the oppression of the Jew in Russia is a blot on Christianity, an open sore in the side of modern civilization, and a perpetual menace to the civic and international health of the whole world.