

ON THE PRESENT

CONDITION OF RUSSIA.

Prince Kropotkin in the Outlook.

Russia is now passing through an extremely important and critical moment of her history.

When Nicholas II. ascended the throne in 1894 it was hoped by optimists that he would inaugurate an era of reforms. Nothing of the sort has been done. The country seemed not to exist for the young ruler, whose chief attention was concentrated upon his own person, upon his marriage and upon the festivities of the coming coronation. Alexander III. was parsimonious. On his death-bed he advised his son to be strictly economical. His own coronation, he had said only cost 13,000,000 rubies (\$6,500,000), but the coronation expenses ought to be and could be further reduced to 7,000,000 roubles (\$3,000,000), taken from the already overburdened State budget. Under the present Czar the watchword is: "Do just as you like! Steal and plunder, but don't worry me!" Alexander III. had a certain policy of his own. His ideal was to keep the country under a strong hierarchy of functionaries, who he would choose himself; but he tried to do his best to prevent the utter ruin of the poorest part of the population—i. e., the peasants. His ideal was that of a benevolent landlord: paternal imperialism, paternal church and paternal flogging of the naughty children. Among the measures taken during his reign one notes, however, the factory legislation (shorter hours of labor for children, factory inspectors, sanitary rules for the factories), and the land legislation favorable to the peasants (inalienability of the village, community lands, peasants' loan banks, etc.), but the two went hand in hand with an attempt to reintroduce manorial justice, with the persecution of other nationalities than the Russian and of other creeds than the Orthodox creed, with the abolition of the higher education for women, and so on. "No, Liberal nonsense, please! Autocracy and the Church will take better care of the folk than your Liberal plutocracy"—that was his idea, expressed lately in a book by his chief adviser, the Procurator of the Synod, Pobiedonostseff. With Nicholas II. the main features of that sort of old-fashioned Czarism have been retained; autocracy, bureaucracy, no education, national and religious persecutions, exile without judgment, law of suspects, etc.—all these continue to flourish, but the benevolence is gone. No one expects, indeed, from Nicholas II. that he ever should take interest in the peasants or the workers, or, in fact, in public affairs at all. The long reports of his ministers fatigue him, and he has neither the desire to take the government into his own hands nor the courage to surrender it to a Representative Assembly. He simply gave carte blanche to those whom he found in official positions; and although he freely throws out money to gratify his courtiers, neither he nor the Empress Alexandra has become even popular. It hardly need be added that all the distinctive features of autocracy—that is, the omnipotence of the police—the searchings, the exile to Sakhalin and Siberia without judgment and the cruel treatment of the political prisoners in the fortresses—remain in full force as of old.

In proportion, however, as all hope of the autocrat himself taking the initiative of reforms is dwindling away a movement within Russian society is asserting itself more and more definitely and this movement takes three separate directions.

One of them is the Labor movement. The government continues to suppress the socialist literature: the press censorship continues to issue periodically its circulars to the editors of the newspapers and reviews prohibiting the discussion of labor questions; and when a strike breaks out in Russia the press is severely warned from mentioning it in its columns. But all these restrictions are of no effect. A cheap daily press has lately grown up in Russia, and that press finds access to the manual laborer. Strikes and labor contests are now so frequent in Europe and America that even in the reactionary papers, and even in the official press the workers continually read something about some great strike at Pittsburgh or at London, or about what the Socialists or the Anarchists are doing in Germany and France; and gradually they come to the conclusion that Russian workers, too, must combine and organize. Besides, the workers themselves are now different from what they were five-and-twenty years ago, when we began the Socialist propaganda among them. At that time they were only just issuing from serfdom; many of them had been serfs a few years before; while the others had lived under the most deadening conditions which serfdom habits and customs had created in Russia. The present generation knows nothing of the servitude under which their fathers had been living. Consequently, a labor movement steadily grows in the industrial centers. It hardly needs more help from the educated classes than labor needs in Europe or in America. This movement must certainly become a factor of growing importance in the

advance of Russia towards political freedom. The abolition of serfdom in 1861 and the introduction of a local self-government in 1864 (when Provincial and District Assemblies, very similar to the English County Councils, were introduced) were entirely due to the pressure of the best part of the educated classes upon the government. This action of the educated classes for wiping out from Russian life the blot of serfdom did not end with the Emancipation act of 1861. It is known that in the seventies a great movement took place among the educated youth of Russia, and that the watchword of this movement was "Vnaro!"—that is, "Be among the people," or rather "Be the people. Thousands of young men and women went to live amidst the peasants and the factory workers, taking the positions of village school masters, village scribes, doctors, vaccinators, midwives, and so on, while some went as mere workers in the factories, or settled upon the land as mere peasants. Every position which only permitted a man or a woman to stand near to the downtrodden mass of the peasants and to be of some use to it was eagerly sought for and immediately accepted.

The government and various writers, more boastful than intelligent, may say that they have crushed that movement out of existence. The reality is, however, that it has never ceased to exist, and that within the last five-and-twenty years new contingents of men never ceased to be contributed to it.

Hundreds of these "populists" were arrested, condemned as revolutionists, and transported to Siberia; thousands were treated as suspects and were compelled to abandon their positions, although they never took any part in a revolutionary agitation. But thousands of them have remained in the provinces, rendering themselves useful in all sorts of local provincial activities, such as doctors, doctors' aids, statisticians, school masters, workers on experimental farms, agricultural inspectors, explorers of domestic trades (large inquiries have been made all over Russia in that direction), organizers of co-operative creameries, and trade associations, and so on. Most of them are young people, no more, and all have won general esteem in their respective localities: so that they now represent a considerable contingent of educated men and women, knowing their own region, well known to the local population, and enjoying the confidence of the peasants and the workers—men and women, who at the same time hate only the more rule of the St. Petersburg absolutism and bureaucracy because they can appreciate on the spot the hindrances which autocracy and bureaucracy create to the normal development of the country. It is no more the young revolutionist standing alone to defy the formidable powers of autocracy, and surrounded by an inert mass of peasants. A new class of men occupies an intermediate position between the two, and this class cannot be brushed aside by the autocratic government.

Ninety per cent. of the total population of European Russia belong to the agricultural class—they are peasants. A characteristic feature of Russia is that the crop, which is the measure of the well-being of the country, is grown, not by the landlords, but by the peasants. Although the landlords own a considerable portion of the arable land of the country, it is not they who grow the main crop. Only in the Baltic provinces and in West and Southwest Russia are the estates of the landlords well cultivated, while in Middle, East and South Russia the landlords merely rent the land to peasants. The large sums of redemption money which the landlords have got from their exserfs, as well as the immense sums obtained through the mortgage of their estates, have been squandered in the most unprofitable way in the capitals and watering places of Europe. Through the Nobility Mortgage Bank (which is supported by the State and freely lends money to the nobility land-owners) the nobles become irretrievably debtors to the State; so that it may be said that by means of these mortgages the State gradually becomes the chief owner of the nobility's lands. To nationalize those lands would thus be a mere banking operation so rapidly the indebtedness of the nobility increases, and so rapidly their chances of ever repaying their debts are vanishing. It is very probable, however, that nothing short of a wide scheme of land nationalization will be capable of substantially improving the present condition; and it must be said that such a measure would offer nothing extraordinary in Russia, because already now the State is the chief land-owner in European Russia, while in Siberia all the land belongs to the State, and private property in land does not exist in that immense territory. The Russian Empire has a population of 135,000,000 inhabitants, out of whom more than one hundred millions live on the territory of European Russia proper. This immense population is a difficulty in itself. In many parts of the Empire it is so thin that electoral districts of 100,000 inhabitants, or even of 50,000 would be too big for all practical purposes. Consequently, a Russian Parliament, elected by universal suffrage (and a limited franchise could not be

accepted, as it would exclude the whole mass of the peasants, i. e., nearly ninety per cent. of the population) would have to consist of at least 2,700, or, at any rate, of nearly 2,000 members. Such a Parliament evidently would not work—experience showing that even with five or six hundred members, a parliament is an awfully huge and unmanageable machinery. Besides, the conditions of the country are so widely different in its separate parts that unless these different regions have legislative institutions of their own an Imperial Parliament would be little better than an Imperial autocracy.

This is why the Grand Duke Constantine advocated, in 1881 (when several schemes of a Constitution for Russia were circulated) five separate Parliaments for the Empire. Finland has already its own Parliament, which manages the finances, the customs, the post and telegraphs, the railways, the judiciary, the army, and all civil institutions of the country; and the Home Rule which Finland now possesses would certainly not be abolished without committing a great injustice and without provoking an insurrection. Constantine's idea was, accordingly, to endow Poland, Caucasasia, and Siberia with independent Parliaments, and to create one or two parliaments for Russia proper.

I am firmly persuaded that the only possible solution for Russia would be to frankly acknowledge the Federalist principle, and to adopt a system of several autonomous Parliaments, as we see it in Canada, instead of trying to imitate the centralized system of Great Britain, France and Germany.

The only possible outcome for Russia is a development on the lines of extensive local self-government—in the region, the province, the canton, and the village; in other words, Federalism in all degrees. Such a development would be at the same time, in accordance with the historical traditions of the nation, and it would correspond to the geographical and ethnological nature of that immense agglomeration of nations and physical regions.

If this principle is not recognized, if Imperialist and Romanist ideas prevail, they will surely become a source of infinite trouble, both exterior and interior. But if this principle prevails, as I hope it will, then Russia will be able to join the family of civilized nations as a new member which will bring with it some precious elements of national life; namely, a nationalized soil, the village community, popular co-operation for all possible purposes, and local industries closely connected with agriculture.

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Equally Guilty.

That quick wit is not confined to cities was proved the other day by a young woman who was rambling along one of the Long Island roads. She was dressed smartly, she thought, and when she met a small, bare legged urchin carrying a bird's nest with eggs in it she did not hesitate to stop him. "You are a wicked boy," she said. "How could you rob that nest? No doubt the poor mother is now grieving for the loss of her eggs."

"Oh, she don't care," replied the urchin, edging away, "she's up in your hat."

Gananoque's Popular Baker.

Mr. Lawrence O'Neill, the well-known dispenser of the "Staff of Life," Gananoque, Ont., says: "I have used Milburn's Heart and Nerve Pills and can highly recommend them for heart troubles and nervousness."

Fancy Religions.

"It was a pouring wet December Saturday night in barracks," says a writer the Nineteenth Century. "and a late after order had been issued altering the hours of divine service on the following day. The battalion orderly sergeant was reading the amendments by the light of a lantern to his shivering audience. 'District after order,' he bellowed. Hours of divine service tomorrow. Denominations will parade as under: Church of England 10.30; Catholics 8.15. The rain beat down relentlessly as he turned over the page of the order book. He observed at a glance that the Presbyterians, Wesleyans and Primitive Methodists were to parade at the same hour, so the rest of the information he imparted in this precise form: 'Fancy religions, 10 o'clock. Right turn. Dismiss.'"

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