

RUSSIA AND FRATERNITY

RECENTLY J. B. Priestley gave a series of three talks from the BBC under the general title of "The Secret Dream," with the sub-headings of "Britain and Liberty," "America and Equality," and "Russia and Fraternity." We print here Priestley's third talk on Russia, which was rebroadcast by the NBS. It approaches the subject from a rather unusual angle and covers some new ground.

PLEASE don't imagine that I've slipped in "Russia and Fraternity" to round off neatly this association of the three great powers with the three terms of the old revolutionary cry. In point of fact, I thought of Russia and Fraternity first. The notion came to me as the direct result of a personal experience, and if I hadn't had that experience, I wouldn't have given these talks.

Last September when I went to Russia I was feeling like millions of other folk—tired, stale, depressed. When I came away from Russia I found myself much heartened and refreshed in spirit, so much so that other people noticed the difference. And this wasn't simply because I'd had a much-needed change and a holiday, and had received some flattering attentions, for I think I'm old enough and sufficiently self-critical to make allowances for all these. No, what heartened and refreshed me was something I soon discovered — and discovered for myself (not expecting it) — behind the outward drabness and occasional discomforts and inconveniences of Russian life. And it wasn't something that could be artificially created—specially laid on for a visitor—for no government could put that warmth into people's voices, that light in their eyes.

Glimpse of a Dream

I went as a friend, and all these people treated me as one. They were

being their natural selves. This atmosphere was theirs, and ever since we said goodbye to a group of poets and playwrights, seeing us off as our train for Finland waited in the Leningrad station on a bitter black midnight, I have sadly missed that atmosphere, and have felt that my own world is socially too cold and calculating.

I had, you see, caught a glimpse of the dream of fraternity. I noticed, too, in Moscow that many foreigners whose duties compelled them to be there (people who saw the worst of the Soviet system and so were sharply hostile to it) came under the spell of this atmosphere. Often while announcing their dislike of the system, they admitted that the place and the people fascinated them. And many of them declared that while they would be heartily glad to be done with any official relations with the Soviet authorities, they would be sorry to leave Moscow. They attributed this charm to the Russian character itself. To them, everything that was good there was Russian, everything bad was Bolshevik.

Literary Legacy

It's a convenient distinction which many people have found very handy. As a judgment, however, its weakness is that it overlooks the inconvenient fact that Bolshevism itself is very Russian, that the Russian Revolution was made by Russians. Indeed, it overlooks many facts that simply can't be ignored. Take, for example, the attitude of the Soviet

authorities towards pre-Revolution literature. Now you can easily discover the Russian dream of fraternity in the finest and most characteristic Russian literature, through which there rings the cry that men are brothers, that we are all members of one family. It's there in the romantic, passionate Pushkin and Lermontov. It gives an edge of despair to the satire of Gogol. It blazes like a beacon on the mountain-summit of Tolstoy; it glimmers in the twilight of Turgenev. It cries in agony in Dostoevski, it gives depth to the pathos and tender humour of Chekhov, and is still triumphant among the wastrels and grotesques of Gorki's underworld.

Did the Bolsheviks silence, as they easily could have done, these noble and prophetic voices? On the contrary, with the utmost haste, they taught their people to read, and then gave them the works of these masters by the million. The figures are stupendous. Over 31,000,000 copies of Pushkin, 24,000,000 copies of Tolstoy, and so on. In other words, instead of silencing this Russian cry for brotherhood, the Revolutionaries amplified it until it rang from the Arctic to the deserts of Southern Asia, and they did this because they believed that they were creating a society that fulfilled at last this desire for fraternity.

Matriarchal Society

In this society, the Communist Party accepts the role of the Great Mother, played by the Church in the Middle



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Ages. Both societies have, in fact, the same matriarchal character, like a family ruled by a vast all-powerful mother who is quick to reward or console, and equally quick to punish any body who threatens the unity of the family. The Russians themselves are anything but a cold and vindictive people, and are indeed, more easy-going in many matters than we and the Americans are. But something deeply emotional and feminine in the spirit of Russian Communism makes it often counter opposition with great severity. This vast Soviet family is still comparatively poor and hasn't enough clothes and carpets and bath-tubs, but this fact — about which so much fuss is made — doesn't seem to me very important. Clothes and carpets and bath-tubs can soon be manufactured if the family is working with a will. What is much more difficult, as some countries will soon discover, is to pull your family together to defeat frustration, and give its members a common purpose.

Indifferent Propagandists

A Russian factory may not be as efficient as an American one, but it's a more human organisation and contains less unhappiness. And here the Russians, instead of being the immensely cunning propagandists they are reputed to be in capitalist circles, have, to my mind, shown themselves to be very indifferent propagandists. They've talked too much about tractors and not enough about states of mind. They've often exaggerated small material gains, and almost ignored gigantic psychological victories.

After all, the final test is not how many things we own, but what kind of people are we. The dream of fraternity, with which the story of the Russian Revolution begins, hasn't been lost inside Russia — or so it seemed to me, when I found myself refreshed by this atmosphere of simplicity, warmth, and affection. Nevertheless, like Britain and America, Russia has its dilemma as well as its dream. The Russian dilemma arises from the fact that the Revolution wasn't welcomed by the world and didn't spread as was originally anticipated, but instead was continuously and bitterly attacked and so had to mask and armour itself and turn the country into a national fortress.

This check met a free-flowing and expansive spirit of fraternity; barriers, all the more rigid because they were so artificial, were erected to keep brotherhood in one place. The very people who cried out that we were all members of



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