RUSSIA: THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE LONG-HAIRED REBELLION

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In 1968, I was not in Paris or in Prague, but Paris and Prague were inside of me. Both revolutions were my revolutions, the revolutions in my life. Living in the Soviet Union in the center of Brezhnev’s Moscow on the main avenue then known as Gorky Street, I somehow seemed out of place and was alone: no one around shared my ideas.

The students of Moscow State University, where I studied philology at the time, were mostly indifferent to the revolutionary events in Europe. They were not rebels by nature. They were not even Soviet conformists: they merely wanted to be left alone; politics frightened them with its unpredictable consequences. Where did my rebellious passions come from?

No relationship to freedom

I grew up in a family of diplomats. My parents were Soviets but decent people, and my father was connected with France through work. We lived in Paris for a few years before the 1960s, and the whole family fell in love with France. My father was a liberal in family life, and my mother was no stranger to cultural liberalism. These facts might seem insignificant to the development of my future worldview, but it was my parents’ decency and their taste for liberal decisions that set the stage for my inclination toward freedom.

My love of literature and my wish to be a writer were no less important. But how many bibliophiles and writers have nothing to do with freedom? Every individual has a rebellious strain. There are limits to everyone’s patience and obedience. But a rebellion only makes sense when it is based on a clear understanding of what freedom and justice are.

“The whole system had to be broken up”

Perhaps I was the only person in the Soviet Union to combine the principles of both revolutions within myself. In 1968, I had already met a few writers and philosophers with a capacity for independent judgment who were prone to intellectual dissent. Obviously or latently anti-Soviet, they reacted negatively to the May movement
in Paris, thinking that the students were far too well off, that their Maoist slogans were deeply amoral in a political sense. On the other hand, naturally enough, they supported the Prague Spring. Even my mother secretly supported “socialism with a human face” and was privately outraged when Soviet tanks entered Prague. By the way, the famous drawing of Lenin shedding a tear because of the Soviet invasion was as politically naïve as my mother’s liberalism. Making cosmetic changes to the Soviet system was not possible. It had to be totally destroyed, not in cooperation with Lenin but against him.

**Drawing upon the principles of freedom and justice**

Soviet propaganda always thrived on anything that destabilized the West, and so it was naturally interested in the Parisian barricades of 1968. This also explains the Soviet intelligentsia’s negative reaction to the barricades. The Prague Spring, on the other hand, was a direct threat to the political system of the Soviet Union, and Brezhnev did everything he could to make it appear vile and grotesque. I was equally passionate about both revolutions, though it seemed impossible to reconcile them inside of me. Their aims were too different, not to mention opposite, but they both drew upon the principles of freedom and justice.

The Parisian barricades were dear to me first and foremost because they constituted a joyful protest. It was not a somber, unenlightened protest, like the one that led Russia to the Bolshevik Revolution, but a happy, mischievous affair. In France, I had become familiar not only with the beauty of Paris and the Côte-d’Azur but also with the pettiness of the petty bourgeoisie, the suspiciousness and the
stinginess of small merchants, the arrogance and prudery of the elite. Already in my student years in Russia, all of this seemed ossified and off-putting. There was not enough fresh air. Long-haired students created a new culture of humor and sex, which appealed to me. Now that it has become fashionable in France to condemn 1968, to complain that it destroyed the foundations of family and education, I still think that the Parisian barricades were an indispensable part of the cultural and political development of Europe.

Against dry teaching and stagnation

Instead of machine guns, students used Maoist slogans as weapons of provocation. Looking from the Soviet Union then at the Maoist badges on the chests of long-haired students, I realized how explosive they were, yet I did not take them seriously but more as a joke. Even now, I prefer the young students in this story to their masters, like Sartre, who were looking for the philosophical roots of rebellion. The philosophy of the Paris rebellion could not be reduced to the anarchist ideas of Mikhail Bakunin or the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre. Rather, it was the demand of human nature in its adolescence, not always logical, but intolerant of dry teaching and stagnation. The protest on the barricades was not just against old morals but also against nationalism. Without 1968, the united Europe of today would not be possible.

The idea of stagnation was also important for the Prague Spring. Whereas Parisian students were fighting against their own bourgeois imbecility, the stagnation in Prague resulted from the continued export of a false revolution that was only disguised as a revolution, being in fact an instrument of Soviet imperialism. Every day in my university library in Moscow, although I did not speak Czech, I read the chief communist newspaper of Czechoslovakia, Rudé Právo, in order to understand what was going on there.

Divested of the last Soviet illusions

For me, Alexander Dubček, the Czechoslovakian reformist politician who presided over the country during the Prague Spring, has always been the polar opposite of Che Guevara, a legendary figure similar to the martyrs of early Christianity. In Prague, the young rebels were long-haired, just as in Paris. I, too, had let my hair grow by then, which I was harassed for at university; sometimes outward marks of distinction become symbols of rebellion. Since then, everyone has short hair and has become terribly reasonable,
but at that time only Soviet soldiers had shaved heads—the targets of tomatoes and cries of indignation when Soviet troops invaded the capital in August.

The invasion of Prague started the true dissident movement in Russia. The delusive hope of liberal changes showed itself to be downright nonsense. A few people went into the Red Square to protest the invasion, but this was just the tip of the iceberg. My mother did not cry over the death of “socialism with a human face” in vain. Deprived of the last Soviet illusions, shocked by the cruelty and the madness of the system, the intelligentsia, to which my mother belonged, refused to cooperate with the authorities. An abyss opened up between them and the system, which was a catastrophic harbinger of change. Without Prague, there would have been no perestroika.

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