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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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# THE PEASANT ELEMENT IN THE RUSSIAN IDENTITY

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The most pronounced aspect of the Russian identity appears to be the role foreign elements have played in determining it.<sup>1</sup> It was the alien Normans or Varangians, as they are known in Russia, who are credited by many historians with having founded the Kievan state. By their ever-present menace, the Asiatic nomads instilled self-awareness in Kievan society. Byzantium provided the Kievan Slavs with a religion, an alphabet, and a Christian culture. The Mongols forged the Moscovite state into being. By his ferocious importation of Western culture and institutions, Peter the Great aroused the Russian national consciousness. Napoleon's invasion solidified that national consciousness into a modern nationalism. Because of Russia's territorial expansion, the present-day Russian population is on the verge of being outnumbered by the other nationalities of the Soviet Union. The Russian language, like the other European languages, has undergone profound changes resulting from foreign cultural influences.<sup>2</sup> And for the past fifty-two years the

<sup>1</sup> The collective identity of a society encompasses the totality of that society's historical condition. The geographical environment as well as the religious orientation, the political preferences and traditions as well as the folklore, historical writings, and philosophical predilections — all of these are elements of a people's collective identity. Expressions of that identity are at least as diverse and complex as its morphological composition, and, at times, its form and its expression may well be indistinguishable from each other. The phenomenon of a collective identity is further complicated by its inconstancy, its fluctuations, vacillations, and the seemingly inevitable impact of forces creating social and cultural change. It is with some awareness of the phantom-like illusiveness of the subject, then, that we venture into an exploration of the Russian identity.

Specifically, this inquiry will be focused on the Russian peasant theme. The method will be interpretive rather than strictly descriptive. The term "Russian identity" will be used to denote the collective awareness expressed by the people who for the past five centuries have been the dominant ethnic group of the country commonly referred to as "Russia."

Although no special study of this subject is available, the following works are relevant: Cherniavsky, Michael, *Tsar and People Studies in Russian Myths*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961; Rogger, Hans, *National Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century Russia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960; and Soloviev, Alexander V., *Holy Russia*. The Hague: Mouton and Company, 1959.

<sup>2</sup> On the internal evolution of the Russian language, see Filin, Fedot P., *Obrazovanie iazyka vostochnykh slavian*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1962. On the influence of foreign words, the following works are useful: Vasmer, Max, *Etimologicheskii slovar' russkogo iazyka*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Progress," 1964, 2 vols.; and Worth, Gerta H., *Foreign Words in Russian — A Historical Sketch, 1550-1800*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963.

Russian identity has been set in the context of a foreign ideology bent on sublimating the national identity within an international superstate.

In the light of such extensive influences from foreign elements, one may well wonder if it is possible to find a societal component which is indigenously Russian. It is our contention that there is, indeed, a major element in Russian society which, due to its relative constancy over a prolonged period of time, has been a carrier of, what could be called, the peculiarly Russian identity. That element is the Russian peasant.

To be sure, the peasant lived in the midst of turbulent and lasting changes, yet, in his daily living, in his values, and his mental responsiveness to life, he remained remarkably constant. Prior to the Revolution of this century the only significant change effected in the peasant identity was that brought about by the Christianization. Yet, even in that case, having accepted Christianity and having paganized it sufficiently to make it his own,<sup>3</sup> the peasant went on living a life which in the nineteenth century was criticized by some intellectuals for being allegedly pagan and praised by others for being truly Christian.<sup>4</sup> He lived in a log cabin at the time of his Christianization, and he lives in a log cabin still. For centuries, his log cabin has provided shelter not only for himself and his family but also for lice, mice, and flies. Yet, until recent times, in that same log cabin the peasant maintained a holy corner. His holy corner housed Christian images, as it had probably housed the pagan ones earlier. Before these images he crossed himself at mealtime and knelt in prayer before retiring at night and at any other times when God's help was needed, be it to cure an illness in his family, to relieve a drought, or to insure proper delivery of a calf.

The Kievan princes, covetous of the religious splendor of the source of their Christianity, erected their own Sancta Sophias; the non-Christian Mongols devastated the Kievan lands; the first Moscovite tsar, Ivan the Terrible, and the first Russian emperor, Peter the Great, tormented the peasant to enhance the power of the state; the ways of Holy Russia were assaulted by the native rulers; the alienated aristocracy molested the peasant physically, and the alienated revolutionary intelligentsia molested him psychologically — each seeking to avenge on him their own frustrations. The revolutionaries despised the peasant for his unresponsiveness to their promises for his liberation. The peasant lived on, enduring it all; alternating

<sup>3</sup> A detailed treatment of the pagan influences in Russian Christianity is found in Sokolov, Academician Y. M., *Russian Folklore*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1950, especially pp. 157-200.

<sup>4</sup> Belinsky's "Letter to Gogol" and Tolstoy's writings, respectively, could serve as an example.

curse with prayers; bowing low before his arrogant earthly masters, yet in his constancy always remaining more confident that they,<sup>5</sup> suffering — always suffering, yet always ready to fill the air with a melancholic song, as if to pour his eternal sadness out onto the boundless plains that surrounded him.

To an historian the Russian peasant presents a surprising paradox: numerically, the peasant has been for centuries the dominant element within Russian society; yet, it is that same element which is also the least known. Since the peasant produced no written record of himself, the historian concerned with the peasant is forced to rely on second-hand accounts and on folklore. The Russian fables are probably the earliest surviving records of the Russian peasant's collective identity. Fables, of course, are fables — an expression of the human imagination rather than a historical record of a society's past; nonetheless, they are reflections of beliefs, values, and aspirations of the society in which they were created.<sup>6</sup> For many centuries, extending back to the pre-Christian past, the nonliterate, and later illiterate, ancestors of the modern Russians poured out their creative souls in colorful didactic imagery and spun countless tales of fantasy. The world of fantasy they created for themselves was a world of unlimited possibilities. In that world there dwelt fire-birds with glowing feathers, flocks of golden goatlings with silvery hooves grazed under the glistening rays of the sun, and snow-white swans flowed foam-like over the emeraldripples of enchanted lakes.

From the earliest times to the present the peasant's beloved hero of the Russian fables has been Ivan the Fool. He does not

<sup>5</sup> Giles Fletcher, who served as British ambassador to Moscow in the 1580's, observed a wide-spread ostensive servility among the Russian populace. "This may truly be said of them, that there is no servant nor bondslave more awed by his master nor kept down in a more servile subjugation than the poor people are, and that universally, not only by the emperor but by his nobility, chief officers, and soldiers, so that when a poor muzhik meeteth with any of them upon the highway he must turn himself about, as not daring to look him in the face, and fall down with knocking of his head to the very ground as he doth unto his idol." ("Of the Russe Commonwealth," in Berry, Lloyd E. and Robert O. Crummey, eds., *Rude and Barbarous Kingdom. Russia in the Accounts of Sixteenth-Century English Voyagers*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968, p. 169.)

<sup>6</sup> An extensive compilation of the Russian fables is Afanas'ev, Aleksandr N., *Narodnye russkie skazki*. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1957, 3 vols. For historical descriptions of the peasant, in addition to general histories of Russia, the following specialized works were used: Blum, Jerome, *Lord and Peasant in Russia From the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961; Grekov, Boris D., *Kiev Rus*. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1959; Grekov, Boris D., *Krest'iane na Rusi s drevneishikh vremen do XVII veka*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1946; Maynard, Sir John, *The Russian Peasant and Other Studies*. New York: Collier Books, 1962; and Robinson, Geroid T., *Rural Russia Under the Old Regime — A History of the Landlord-Peasant World and a Prologue to the Peasant Revolution of 1917*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.

always bear the same name and in some fables is depicted not as a peasant but as the youngest of the three sons of a tsar, but his chief characteristics remain the same. Ivan the Fool is a simpleton, who is invariably tormented by his older brothers and his friends. He is usually given some impossible task to perform at the pain of death. As he proceeds to carry out such a task, he is hampered by his own mental sluggishness and by the obstacles erected in his path through the deliberate antics of his comrades. Yet, Ivan plods ahead, in his awkward and seemingly self-defeating manner, and in the end he always triumphs. He triumphs over his cunning comrades not by design, not by outwitting them in their sinister games, but by remaining constant in and true to his simplistic ways. He does not defeat his enemies — they are usually defeated by their own cunning and wickedness.

To the Russian peasant, for the past five centuries or more, the most popular representative of the Ivan-the-Fool theme has been the epic hero named Ilya of Murom. A whole cycle of epic tales, fables, and even songs was created around this folk hero.<sup>7</sup> Ilya of Murom is a strong man or *bogatyr*. He is the son of a peasant. For the first thirty years of his life he was paralyzed and confined to a chair. Then, one day, two pilgrims came to his home and gave him a potion. The ritual of drinking the potion accomplished, Ilya was asked how strong he felt himself to be. He replied that had there been a pole in the sky with a ring at one end, he would be able to pull that ring and upturn "the whole of Russia."<sup>8</sup> He was given another potion, which reduced his powers to one-half, and then he was instructed to use his powers for doing good deeds only and was told that he was not fated to die in battle. Thereafter, Ilya roamed the countryside on his hefty steed, defending his prince and the people against their enemies.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Variant texts of these are found in Astakhova, Anna M., *Il'ia Muromets*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1958. Although some of the themes of Ilya of Murom tales derive from early pre-Christian prototypes, the main epic was probably composed late in the eleventh century. The first recorded mention of Ilya of Murom dates to 1547. (*Ibid.*, pp. 406-419.)

<sup>8</sup> *Vot byl by stolb na nebe, a na tom stolbe bylo by kol'tso — vziatsia by ia za eto kol'tso, perevernul by vsiu Russku zemliu.* (*Ibid.*, p. 315.)

It is interesting to note that in 1902 the son of another Ilya, named Vladimir Lenin, expressed a similar idea of his native Russia: "Give us an organization of revolutionists, and we shall overturn the whole of Russia!" (Lenin, Vladimir, *What Is to Be Done?* New York: International Publishers, 1929, p. 119.)

<sup>9</sup> *Byliny* or epic tales have been studied by many scholars. In this paper the following studies of the subject were relied upon: Propp, V. Ia. and B. N. Putilov, eds., *Byliny*. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1958, 2 vols.; Propp, V. Ia., *Osnovnye etapy razvitiia russkogo geroicheskogo eposa*. Leningrad: 1958; and Rybakov, Boris A., *Drevniaia Rus' Skazaniia, byliny, letopisi*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1963.

To cite a representative example of Ilya's exploits, one may consider the poetic tale "Ilya of Murom and the Most Monstrous Idol."<sup>10</sup> With the Monstrous Idol being an image of the Mongol invaders, the tale relates how once upon a time

The Monstrous pagan Idol came to the throne city of Kiev,  
Breathing threats, striving to inspire great fear —

and challenged Prince Vladimir to send out

"... a foeman great of strength,  
So that he may stand against the Monstrous Idol."  
Thereupon Vladimir the Prince became afeard,  
Most dreadfully afeard, and weebegone besides.  
Thereupon Ilya spake to him these words.  
"Be thou not weebegone, Vladimir, be not thou grieved :  
In battle to fall is not written in my fate's scroll;  
I will ride forth into the open field, the sea-wide field,  
And that Monstrous Idol of the pagans slay."

Ilya, typically the simpleton of the Ivan-the-Fool theme, is far from being lucid. On his way to challenge the Monstrous Idol in mortal combat,

... it was no small oversight he was guilty of :  
He had not taken along his war-club of chilled steel,  
And he had not taken with him his razor-keen sword.

Fortunately for Ilya, he met a traveller carrying a staff "weighing three hundred pounds or more" and promptly relieved him of it. Upon reaching the palace in which the Monstrous Idol dwelt, Ilya and his foe exchanged some potent insults and then charged at each other. When the Idol's dagger grazed Ilya's ear,

The mighty heart of Ilya of Murom was inflamed thereat,  
He snatched off his comely head the cap from the land of Greece,  
And threw it in the face of the Monstrous heathen Idol;  
And then he clove the Monstrous Idol in twain,  
And thereon they chanted dirges for the Monstrous Idol.

Thus it was that Ilya, the peasant, saved Vladimir, the prince, who had been dreadfully afraid of the Monstrous Idol.

Princes, however, are at times prone to forget the kind deeds of their subjects. There is another tale describing a feud between Ilya and Vladimir. Although Ilya's power was such that he could easily have defied the Prince's authority, he submitted to his sovereign and spent many years chained in a dungeon. It came to pass that once again, threatened by a powerful enemy, the Prince was in need of Ilya's services. Upon entering the dungeon to release the peasant hero, the Prince's attendants found not an angry giant smoldering

<sup>10</sup> The English translation cited here is from Guernev, Bernard G., ed., *A Treasury of Russian Literature*. New York: The Vanguard Press, 1943, pp. 40-42. The Russian text is in Astakhova, *Ilya Muromets*, pp. 150-52.

with hatred toward his ungrateful master but a simple pious peasant reading the Holy Scriptures by candlelight.<sup>11</sup>

Such was Ilya of Murom: brutish in strength, lumbering in thought, merciless with his enemies, servile toward his prince, pious in spirit. Even with a scant knowledge of the traditional life of the Russian peasant, one cannot but recognize in Ilya the image the Russian peasants have for centuries regarded to be their own collective identity.

Following the Christianization of the Kievan Rus, the Ivan-the-Fool theme became associated with the kenotic idea, or the idea of suffering Christ-like without resisting evil. In 1015, that is, twenty-seven years after introducing Christianity to his land, Prince Vladimir died. His death precipitated a struggle for power among his sons. In that contest the older son, Prince Sviatopolk, murdered his two younger brothers, Boris and Gleb. To the peasants the two victims were portrayed as martyrs who died without resisting their murderers, in order to save the people from a civil war. Since the two brothers were the first to be canonized in the newly-established Kievan Church, their martyrdom was widely accepted, and the ideas associated with it gradually became fused with the ideas of the Ivan-the-Fool theme.<sup>12</sup> This characteristic, that is, suffering Christ-like, has been revered by the peasant of Russia up to modern times. Holy men (*yurodivye*) or Fools-in-Christ, were a common sight in Russia right up to the days of Joseph Stalin. These homeless, and often physically deformed, men helped by their own suffering to alleviate the suffering of their oppressed fellow-peasants of the general population.

With the flowering of the Russian secular culture in the nineteenth century, the image of the Holy Ivan the Fool was immortalized in music, painting, and literature. Through these media, Ivan the Fool of the early fables, the giant Ilya of Murom of the epic tales, and the Holy Fool of Christian imagery were consciously developed to serve as symbolic representations of the living Russian peasant. The central figure of the first Russian opera, Glinka's *Life for the Tsar* (first performed in 1836), is a peasant named Ivan Susanin. Ivan Susanin's fame rests upon the sacrifice he made of his own life in order to save the life of Tsar Michael, the first Romanov. By this act Susanin spared Russia from a renewal of the fratricidal strife

<sup>11</sup> Osorgina, A. M., *Istoriia russkoi literatury (s drevneishikh vremen do Pshkina)*. Paris: The Y.M.C.A. Press, 1955, pp. 16-20.

<sup>12</sup> Fedotov, George P., *The Russian Religious Mind: Kievan Christianity — The Tenth to the Thirteenth Centuries*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960, pp. 94-110.

The idea of the fusion of the kenotic and the Ivan-the-Fool themes is mine. Fedotov discusses the general influence of the kenotic idea associated with the death of Boris and Gleb.

associated with the Time of Troubles. What we see here is the ancient Boris-and-Gleb theme, only this time the sufferer-in-Christ is a peasant. In Nesterov's well-known painting *Na Rusi or Life in Russia*, completed in 1916, it is a peasant boy and a holy fool who lead the Russian people, the tsar, the intelligentsia, and the clergy in a search for Christ.<sup>13</sup> The Tolstoyan peasant is both the savior of historical Russia in the person of Kutuzov, in *War and Peace*, and the savior of spiritual Russia in the person of Platon Karataev, in the same work. One may also note in this connection that some of the leading nineteenth-century Russian thinkers, including Tolstoy and Vladimir Soloviev, imitated Ivan the Fool or the peasant in their personal mode of life.

Among the Eastern Slavs the earliest manifestation of the concept of motherland was probably their pagan worship of Mother Moist Earth.<sup>14</sup> The idea of a motherland, in the political sense, seems to have originated in connection with the controversial invitation to Rurik of 862. "Our whole land is great and rich, but there is no order in it. Come to rule and reign over us," was the momentous message the Slavs of Novgorod allegedly sent to the Varangians.<sup>15</sup> Even if one would reject the authenticity of the message itself, which survives in a chronicle written some two hundred and fifty years after the event, one has to recognize that the act of sending such an invitation implies some degree of political awareness on the part of its authors. At any rate, the establishment of the state, which occurred seventeen years (879) after the invitation, incontrovertibly implies such an awareness among the Kievan Slavs.

By the twelfth century the use of epithets such as "our land" and "our Russian land" had become widespread. This is evident in the *Primary Chronicle*, completed by 1118, and in *The Lay of the Host of Igor*, written after 1185.<sup>16</sup> The *Primary Chronicle* is the

<sup>13</sup> A discussion and a reproduction of this painting can be found in Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People*, pp. 61, 223.

<sup>14</sup> Vernadsky, George, *The Origins of Russia*. London: Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 123.

Vernadsky connects the origin of that worship to an earlier worship of Mokosh — the only feminine deity in the Kievan pantheon. Mokosh was especially venerated by women and was represented as a woman with long hands. Mother Moist Earth (*Mati Syra Zemlia*) was venerated in some regions of Russia as late as the second half of the nineteenth century, and the term *mati syra zemlia*, in peasant usage, continues to have a religious connotation. (*Ibid.*, p. 131.)

<sup>15</sup> The English translation is from Zenkovsky, Serge A., ed., *Medieval Russian Epics, Chronicles, and Tales*. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1963, p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> English translation of the *Primary Chronicle* is in Cross, Samuel H., ed., *The Russian Primary Chronicle (Povest' vremennykh let)*. Cambridge: Medieval Academy of America, 1953.

Probably the most accurate English translation of the *Lay of Igor* is Nabokov, Vladimir, trans., *The Song of Igor's Campaign — An Epic of the Twelfth Century*.

first known systematic attempt at writing a history of the Kievan Rus. *The Lay of the Host of Igor* is an account of the military encounter which took place in 1185 between the troops of several princes of the Kievan state and the forces of the nomadic Polovtsy. Likhachev, a prominent Soviet scholar of ancient Russian culture, refers to this epic as "the greatest patriotic poem of the ancient Rus," and he appears to be justified in using the modern term "patriotic" in this regard.<sup>17</sup> This remarkable poem does, indeed, suggest the kind of mood associated with modern patriotism or even nationalism. The epithet "Russian land" is used more than twenty times in that poem, and in most cases that epithet signifies an intensely patriotic feeling. By the use of that epithet the poet has the princes painfully lamenting their departure from their native land and expressing a willingness to die for it. In all of this there is incontrovertible testimony, at least on the part of the poet, of an awareness of a collective political identity.

During the Moscovite period the concept of motherland among the Russians was to a large extent determined by the dramatic developments characterizing that period: the struggle against the Mongols, the emergence of Moscow as the potential religious center of the Orthodox world, and the political and territorial growth of the Moscovite state. This was also the period of proliferation of legends and theories about the Russian political identity, and through that theorizing, in the sixteenth century, the origin of the Russian dynasty was extended to the Emperor Augustus of Rome. A claim was made by the Prince of Moscow for the imperial Byzantine authority, and the city of Moscow was labelled as the Third and the last Rome. These officially-sponsored conceptions of the Russian identity, however, were never as meaningful to the Russian peasant as was the concept of Holy Russia, which also has its origin in the Moscovite period.

Although the idea of holiness as such was brought to the Kievan Slavs along with Christianity at the end of the tenth century and although there developed a close relationship between the church and the state right from the time of Christianization, it is in the writings of the sixteenth century that we find the earliest surviving record of the use of the epithet "Holy Russia." These writings are Prince Kurbsky's *Correspondence* and his *History of the Prince of Moscow*, both dating to the 1570's. Following the Time of Troubles, that is, in the beginning of the seventeenth century, the term "Holy

New York: Vintage Books, 1960. The Russian text used in Likhachev, Dimitrii S., ed., *Slovo o polku Igoreve*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Khudozhestvennaia literatura," 1964.

<sup>17</sup> Likhachev, *Slovo o polku Igoreve*, p. 8.

Russia" came into common usage.<sup>18</sup> Although Kurbsky in his time used the epithet with the conscious aim of counteracting the power of the tsar, in the seventeenth century the term assumed the connotation of a Holy Land ruled by a gentle tsar elected by the people. The idea of an elected people's tsar was, of course, not entirely without historical justification, for the *Zemsky Sobor* (Common Assembly) did indeed play a role in the election of the first Romanov.

The seventeenth-century concept of Holy Russia denoted a collective identity which was distinct from both the peasant's identity as represented in the Ivan-the-Fool theme and the official Russian state in any of its expressed imagery. Holy Russia was not the people as such nor the official state but a people's state. The concept of Holy Russia was based on select empirical components which constituted the historical Russian nation. Among these were the church, and especially the congregation and the holy icons; the land; the language; the symbolism associated with the gentle father-tsar figure; the oral folklore tradition; the peasant village council; and the peasant in his collective image as Ivan the Holy Fool.<sup>19</sup>

One of the assumptions about Russian history adhered to by many modern historians is that the Russian peasant, with his notion of a Holy Russia, has been the bulwark of political conservatism. And, on the basis of a superficial appraisal of the peasant's way of life, it is indeed possible to argue that "Holy Russia," being an immutable concept with a transcendental meaning, precludes the possibility of political evolution. Also, "conservatism" could probably be discerned from the fact that the term for Russia used in the epithet "Holy Russia" was not "Rossia" of Petrine vintage but the ancient "Rus" of Kievan days. This type of reasoning, however, is in itself anachronistic in our post-Hitler, post-Stalin time, for these modern rulers have painfully demonstrated that modernity of a concept or of political institutions is not necessarily a measure of their democratism. In reality, the reason that the Russian peasant preferred the old "Rus" to the modern "Rossia" was probably not due to his conservative predilections at all. On the contrary, "Rus" to him was a gentle *matushka* or Mother Russia, whereas "Rossia" denoted a harsh official *otchizna* or fatherland. What is more, the very immutability of the concept "Holy Russia" implies a perfection. Politically that perfection meant a God-inspired brotherhood. Whether

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of this, see Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People*, pp. 107-127; and Soloviev, *Holy Russia*, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> In defining the term "Holy Russia," Cherniavsky notes that "it was a territorial concept insofar as it embraced the land of salvation, with its icons, saints, and the Christian Russian people. The way in which the epithet was used in popular folksongs and epics did not prescribe the political form of Russian society; that is to say, Russia could be 'Holy Russia' whether there was a tsar or not." (*Tsar and People*, pp. 114-15.)

such a brotherhood ever existed in actuality is another matter; the idea of it, nonetheless, was not only widely spread among the peasants but, in fact, became embodied in the very word "peasant," which is *krestianin* or Christian.<sup>20</sup>

Politically the Holy Russia concept wrought a number of diverse effects on pre-revolutionary Russian society. By his forced Westernization, Peter the Great defied Holy Russia; and that defiance brought a permanent split between official Russia and the aristocracy on one hand and the peasantry on the other. With the secularization of the state and the introduction of the imperial concept, the tsar ceased being a gentle people's tsar in the eyes of the peasant, even though the latter continued to pray for him in the hope that the tsar would rejoin Holy Russia. By the second half of the eighteenth century the Russian aristocracy became thoroughly Westernized and, thereby, further alienated from the peasant and Holy Russia.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Holy Russia became identified solely with the peasant; and when in the nineteenth century there emerged a third element within Russian society, the intelligentsia, that element found itself alienated from both official and Holy Russia. In their search for an identity, the intelligentsia split into two distinct movements: the Slavophiles and the Westernizers. The Slavophiles romanticized the peasant concept of Holy Russia and attempted to rejoin that Russia. The Westernizers, on the other hand, romanticized various Western political ideas and despised both official and Holy Russia. As a result of this defiance, the more radical element of the Westernizers remained permanently alienated within their own society, and it is they who eventually adopted the new identity in the form of Marxism.

Although from the time of the Petrine break with Holy Russia the government never openly acknowledged the existence of that Russia, officials such as Minister of Education Uvarov, during the reign of Nicholas I (1825-1855), and Procurator of the Holy Synod Pobedonostsev, during the reign of Nicholas II (1894-1917), attempted to superimpose an official state nationalism over the Holy Russia concept. The Pan-Slavist unofficial proponents of nationalism, such as Danilevsky, attempted a similar fusion. And the radical revolu-

<sup>20</sup> According to Blum, the term *krestianin* began to be applied as a proper name for the peasantry in the fourteenth century. (*Lord and Peasant in Russia*, p. 106.)

<sup>21</sup> To Karamzin, this alienation appeared to be a sign of decline in "civic virtues." (Pipes, Richard, trans., *Karamzin's Memoir on Ancient and Modern Russia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959, p. 123.) A more extensive treatment of the problem of alienation in the eighteenth century is in Rogger, *National Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century Russia*; and in Billington, James H., *The Icon and the Axe An Interpretive History of Russian Culture*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966.

tionaries tried to supplant the Holy Russia idea with the idea of revolution. The Slavophiles and other intellectuals who indulged in a pious veneration of the peasant way of life, on the other hand, tried to make the idea of Holy Russia into a national philosophy. As for the peasant himself, Holy Russia remained more of a hope, a belief, than a malleable theory.

The twentieth century has generally been an anti-peasant century, and this has been especially true in Russia. The five-year plans of the 1930's were directed toward eradication of the traditional Russian way. In the process the exploitation of the peasant was far more intense than the exploitation he had endured under foreign dominance of the Mongol period or under native landowners during the centuries of serfdom. Soviet industrialization was carried out largely at the expense of the Russian peasant. It was he, the peasant, after all, who was the chief casualty constituting the grim statistic of some thirteen million who died as a result of Stalin's repressions.

In the peasant idiom one could say that the encounter between the traditional peasant way of life and the communist process of modernization was an encounter between an immobile, moss-gathering boulder and a keenly-tempered scythe. (*Kosa na kamen' naskochila.*) As we have seen, for centuries the Russian peasant viewed himself as a lumbering, apolitical, good-natured, spontaneously-living Holy Fool. The new communist man, on the other hand, was to be, what Lenin called, a man "Americanized" in efficiency; totally politicized in his thinking; suspicious of his fellow-men in his vigilance against the ever-present enemies of the people;<sup>22</sup> void of spontaneity — a characteristic especially despised by Lenin; void of religious belief; and wholly rational. As Trotsky observed, when he was the commissar of war, the Revolution was carried out with the avowed aim of eradicating the peasant identity.

For what is our Revolution [he wrote in 1924], if it is not a mad rebellion in the name of the conscious, rational, purposeful and dynamic principle of life, against the elemental, senseless, biologic automatism of life, that is, against the peasant roots of our old Russian history, against its aimlessness, its non-teleological character,

<sup>22</sup> In 1843 a Prussian traveller observed a similar demand for vigilance placed on the Russian peasant by his government.

"All the Russian villages through which I passed on this road consist of a long, broad, and generally straight street, seldom with side streets. The dwelling-houses stand close together, — very frequently two immediately adjoining; then come, right and left, the narrow courtyards of the houses with entrance-gates; then again two more dwelling-houses, and so on: an order of the police is said to have gradually produced this arrangement, although I am inclined to think it is founded upon old custom. Each inhabitant is thus able, and is bound, to watch over and act the part of police to his next neighbour, and is watched by him in turn." (Haxthausen, Baron von, *The Russian Empire, Its People, Institutions, and Resources*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1856, 2 vols., vol. I, p. 20.)

against the "holy," and idiotic philosophy of Tolstoi's Karataiev in "War and Peace"? If we take this away from the Revolution, then the Revolution is not worth the candles which were burned for it, and, as is known, much more than candles were burned for it.<sup>23</sup>

It was to accomplish this transformation that the peasant was subjected to the Stalinist purgation.

Since the Soviet type of modernization involves a rapid process of urbanization, and urbanization being the chief destroyer of the peasant way of life, it is pertinent to ask whether the Russian peasant identity is not on the verge of extinction. Whereas on the eve of the Revolution more than eighty per cent of the total population in Russia were peasants, in 1959 the rural population of the Soviet Union was only some fifty-two per cent of the total, and the projected figure for 1980 is a mere thirty-two per cent.<sup>24</sup> Thus, numerically at least, the Russian peasant seems to be a rapidly vanishing species. If one would also take into account the spread of literacy in the Soviet Union, the outlook for the future of the traditional Russian identity is indeed a negative one. Yet, in spite of all these pressures against the peasant's way of life, his identity persists, and it persists with considerable tenacity. Soviet technological advancements notwithstanding, the peasant still lives in a log cabin with a thatched roof and an earthen floor. He hasn't become void of the spontaneity of life. He hasn't become a modern robot conditioned to repeat a series of pre-recorded political announcements. Rather, he has served as the moral guide for such Soviet intellectuals as Anna Akhmatova, Pasternak, Solzhenitsyn, and Kuznetsov, as he did for Pushkin, Nekrasov, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy in the previous century. *Dr. Zhivago*, after all, may be the only successful Christian novel produced in our century, and its central figure is none other than a neo-Tolstoyan Ivan the Fool. And even in their urbanized form the Russians, by and large, are still peasants in their values, their openness toward their fellow-men, and their simplicity of life. In fact, because of the rapidity of urbanization, the resulting cultural assimilation flows two ways: on one hand, the peasant is becoming urbanized, on the other, he is converting the city dwellers into villagers.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Trotsky, Leon, *Literature and Revolution*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1966, pp. 109-110.

<sup>24</sup> Eason, Warren W., "Population changes," in Kassof, Allen, ed., *Prospects for Soviet Society*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968, pp. 234-235. For data on the 1959 Soviet population census, see *Pravda*, May 10, 1959.

<sup>25</sup> For a systematic study of the Soviet peasant's beliefs and attitudes, see Bauer, Raymond A., Alex Inkeles, and Clyde Kluckhohn, *How the Soviet System Works Cultural, Psychological, and Social Themes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957. Other relevant works are Black, Cyril E., ed., *The Transformation of Russian Society Aspects of Social Change Since 1861*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960; and Kassof, *Prospects for Soviet Society*.

Whether the modern and the traditional ways shall fuse or whether the all-pervasive modernity shall eradicate the more supine traditional peasant way is at present a problematic proposition. Khrushchev, in his day, was confident that the new, fully-rational, man would replace the traditional one by 1980. As if to caution the exuberant premier about the world the new man might establish, Solzhenitsyn, in his description of the female Ivan the Fool named Matryona, bewails her death with a sorrowful warning.

She was misunderstood and abandoned by her husband, having buried six of his children. Her moral and ethical standards made her a misfit. She was considered "odd" by her sisters and her sisters-in-law — a laughingstock — because, as they said, she was so stupid as to work for others without pay. She never accumulated property against the time of her death when her only possessions were a dirty-white goat, a crippled cat, and rubber plants . . . .

We all lived beside her, and never understood that she was that righteous one without whom, according to the proverb, no village can stand.

Nor any city.

Nor our whole land.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Solzhenitsyn, Alexander, "Matryona's House," in Blackstock, Paul W., trans., *We Never Make Mistakes* — *Two Short Novels by Alexander Solzhenitsyn*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1963, p. 100.