

A Russian Carole

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According to Marx and other philosophers of the day, Russia was the last place that communism would take hold. It was backward technologically and so was missing the crucial middle class which Marx envisioned as the crucial component necessary for communist revolution. So why did communist revolution begin in Russia, of all places? This creative essay, a flight of fancy, highlights some crucial revolutionary events in Russian history and the thoughts of some important philosophers in the 19th Century, all of which culminated in the tragedy of Bloody Sunday. Borrowing from Dickens' A Christmas Carole, the tale is told through the eyes of Grand Duke Constantine, grandson to Catherine the Great and heir to the throne. The dots are not filled in, but along the way the reader may become curious to learn more about these pivotal events, and the agents who incited them, which ultimately toppled the Sleeping Giant of Mother Russia.

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The laudanum began to take effect, and as it did his jaw muscles unclenched and his mind began to slip sideways. His pristine officer's uniform, styled after the Prussians, with its crispness, gleaming medals, and burnished leather, hung on the wardrobe, now exchanged for a crumpled and soiled nightdress, damp with sour sweat. He and many of his men were no longer only fighting the Polish army who had revolted against the Tsar¹, but they were now warring with an invisible enemy, cholera. He had fallen ill when he left the battlefield, having been ordered home by Alexander² when he had received the reports that during the battle Constantine³ had been cheering for the Poles. He could not restrain himself! After all, he had trained and overseen the Polish

¹ 1830 November Uprising or Polish–Russian War

² Tsar Alexander I, ruled 1801–1825; grandson of Catherine the Great

³ Grand Duke Constantine, eldest grandson of Catherine the Great

soldiers for the last fifteen years as Commander-in-Chief. What a thrill it had been for him when the Tsar had given him charge of his very own troops, overseeing every detail. As a child he had played with toy soldiers, as an adolescent he had paraded the troops with his father,⁴ and as a young officer he had maneuvered soldiers against Napoleon. The military was Constantine's life.

As the eldest, Constantine was in line to become Tsar, but in secret negotiations with Alexander he had renounced his right to succeed to the throne. He had neither the inclination for it nor the ability to be Tsar. In exchange for the throne, Alexander had turned over all of Poland, not just the military, to Constantine, and had taken a hands-off approach to Poland's rule. Born to be an autocrat, Constantine ruled Poland with tireless energy. During his fifteen-year stint in Poland, revolution was always threatening; the Poles had taken their cues from the rest of Europe in the 18th Century. Now he lay dying.

As the laudanum's concentration rose, he seemed to become untethered from his body. The ache subsided and he felt well. In due course, he found that he was free to rise up and out of his body, curiously able to leave it behind. In the adjoining room, a modest table was the central feature in the largely empty space, and atop was displayed an elaborate Russian tea service. From the spout a mist rose and took shape, as if from Aladdin's lamp, and a Spirit spoke: "I have much to show you. I am the Spirit of Russia Past, and Russia to Come." With a sudden whoosh, the pair took flight in a storm of clouds and swirling lights. The protests which Constantine managed to utter streaked away without any consequence, dissolving into the whirling void. In short order, the cloud deposited them in a Russian peasant village. He recognized Potemkin,⁵ his grandmother's lover and advisor, long since buried. Potemkin distributed elaborate, traditional, peasant costumes to a small group of folks assembled nearby. Potemkin instructed, "Those who receive these costumes must present themselves, in sober and dignified fashion, along the Tsarina's route. The remainder of you must hide yourselves away from view." Craftsmen of all sorts were putting the final touches on the building facades which lined the route along which the Tsarina's carriage would pass. Potemkin had built the entire village,⁶ plus

⁴ Paul I of Russia, reigned 1796–1801

⁵ Grigory Potemkin, advisor to Catherine the Great

⁶ Potemkin Villages along Catherine's journey to Crimea in 1787

others like it, to ensure that Tsarina Catherine beheld a curated picture of the Serfs' lives.

The Spirit guided Constantine away from the preparations and toward the actual peasant dwellings. Opening the door, they were greeted with a smoke-filled, squalid, dwelling. Crushing poverty, fatigue, and darkness characterized the living conditions. Constantine's eyes fell on the father, collapsed in a corner in a drunken stupor. "One way the peasants cope with the burden of their lives is through vodka. The Crown owns the exclusive right to produce and sell it to her citizens. Perhaps Mother Russia has chosen to anesthetize her people, and to raise a sizable sum in the process?" queried the Spirit. At this, Constantine retorted: "These people are not like us; they are simple. Brutish. Illiterate. You may as well say that a bovine is unhappy with hay or the plow. The serf is born to this life, and he has consolations. This is the way of things." The pair returned to the road in time to see an entourage processing through the street. Magnificent horses drew the royal carriage, and inside he saw his grandmother and Potemkin. They drove by waving, with the flash of glittering smiles.

The Spirit informed Constantine that they would be leaving the village and going to St. Petersburg to inspect some soldiers. This idea pleased Constantine immensely, with his affinity for all things military. No man could ever impress him unless he were part of a regiment. The cloud sucked them upward again and this time deposited them on a noisy street, around dusk. Everything felt familiar. The pair entered a rather dark and clandestine-looking hall, and Constantine could hear a lusty debate transpiring. The Spirit informed him that these men were part of the Free Masons and were mostly military men who had been stationed in France after Napoleon's defeat. Russia had left an occupying force of 30,000 in France for some years after the war. While there, the soldiers saw firsthand a society with relative freedom of speech, absence of serfdom, a constitution of sorts, and regular judicial processes. It was a society whose members could circulate new ideas.⁷ The Spirit went on: "When the occupying soldiers returned to Russia, they missed the freedoms to which they had become accustomed. The soldiers who are assembled here are known as the *Northern Group* of revolutionaries. The *Southern Group* has ties with a similar revolutionary society in Poland. In fact, the

⁷ J. N. Westwood, *Endurance and Endeavour: Russian History 1812–2001*, 5th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 28.

Southern Group vowed to “dispose” of you when revolution came!” At this, the veins in Constantine’s forehead began to show. He inhaled sharply to vent his outrage but was struck dumb, and immobilized, by the Spirit’s outstretched hand. One of the group’s organizers, Trubetskoy,⁸ shouted above the others, “The time has come, we must seize it! We won’t get another chance like this! If Constantine and Nicholas won’t decide between them who is to be Tsar, we will decide for them. We will march to the Senate Square and refuse to swear the Oath to Nicholas!⁹ The time is ripe for us to seize power and bring Liberty to Russians!”

Constantine recognized that these were the days immediately after Alexander’s sudden death.¹⁰ Alexander had failed to inform his officials that Nicholas would succeed him instead of Constantine. Now, Nicholas was vacillating, and in the unstable interregnum, the Northern and Southern societies were seizing their chance. The Spirit took Constantine to the Square to see the event play out. Led by their officers, three thousand soldiers marched to the Senate Square as planned, but the standoff was poorly coordinated and, in the end, the newly ascendant Tsar Nicholas simply trained his guns upon them. The Spirit turned to Constantine and said, “In a few centuries one historian will say about this failed revolution, ‘It was unprecedented for the gentry and the army to make a rebellion, not for themselves, but for a better society, and to ally themselves with intellectuals.’” Constantine replied: “They are treacherous bastards! The Guard’s officers were always staging sabotage at court to overthrow the Tsar and put their man in power.” To which the Spirit responded: “Ah, but this time they had aimed at something more noble than self-interest.”¹¹

Once again, the two were swept up to a new destination. Having grown accustomed to the adventure, Constantine looked forward to their next stop. Although judgmental at times, the Spirit was turning out to be a good tour guide, and it made a nice change from the aching suffering to which he had been subjected the last few days. Arriving on a bustling city street, Constantine felt the surroundings to be of an alien world. Iron carriages filled the

⁸ Sergei Petrovich Trubetskoy

⁹ This defiance was treasonous.

¹⁰ The throne was in dispute between Nicholas and Constantine after Alexander’s sudden death. The throne was unclaimed for a month, sparking the Decembrist Revolution of 1825.

¹¹ Westwood, 31.

streets in a jumble he had never seen the likes of; they moved of their own accord without horses. The city noise was a cacophony of sound, similar in intensity to the battlefield, and likely as dangerous given the rate of speed with which the carriages moved. Stopping before a museum of some sort, Constantine read, "Madame Tussauds." Inside was dark, and the Spirit explained that it was a type of living history museum, except that none of the exhibits were alive; apparently, the figures were sculpted from wax. Pressing a button at each figure would cause the figure to appear to come alive and speak. Upon witnessing this for the first time, Constantine jumped involuntarily, and it took great self-mastery to not run in terror. He took his cues from the other patrons, some mere children, who took the whole experience in stride and with apparent enjoyment.

Standing before the first figure, the Spirit explained that this particular German philosopher, Karl Marx, had transformed the world's thinking about how societies advance and had forecast clashes between social groups as a precursor to change. Constantine pressed the large red button to hear more.

Karl Marx: All of history is a clash between two social groups: those who exploit and those who are exploited. The revolutions we see transpiring across Europe are the first eruptions of discontent which are the precursor to the final stages of human social development. In that epoch, there will no longer be a few elite, and vast numbers of peasants, but a large swath of society will constitute a new middle class. These workers will own no land; all they will have to sell is the labor of their hands. The day will come when this group, tired of being exploited, will overthrow the elite and establish a classless society. In the dawning of that great era, people will work for the common good. Each will work according to his ability and will take from the collective wealth only such as he needs.

Constantine snorted, "Ha! Absurd! A peasant can no more move upward than the Tsar can move down. The Tsar is led by God. To allow peasants to run the country is like letting children run the household. Look what happened in France."

The wax figures were slightly unnerving, with their odd sounding voices, as if they were in a well, and their unblinking,

glass eyes. They spoke without the slightest movement in their faces. Constantine was mesmerized. He moved to the next display and saw that this statue was a Russian, which was heartening.

Nechayev¹²: *The Russian must repudiate squarely the classical model of revolution in vogue in the Western countries, which is always deferring to property and to the traditional social order of so-called civilization and morality, and which only replaces one State by another; the Russian revolutionist must eradicate the State, with all its traditions, institutions, and classes. Thus, the group that foments the revolution will not try to impose on the people any political organization from above: the organization of the future society will doubtless arise from the people themselves. Our business is simply destruction, terrible, complete, universal, and ruthless.*¹³

“I hope they hung him!” was all that Constantine could manage in response to Nechayev’s destructive and anarchistic message, even if it did acknowledge that Russia should reject the West.

“The next figure disagreed with Marx too,” enticed the Spirit. Constantine had now lost all fear—it was amazing how quickly one habituated to magic—and he invoked the next figure.

Lavrov¹⁴: *You have heard Marx claim that in order for societies to advance they must first proceed through a phase when industrialization and capitalism transforms society. He claims that only with capitalism and its factories, unequal wealth distribution, and minions working as cogs in vast industrial complexes, will the workers be sufficiently exploited, and sufficient in number, to rise up and collectively throw off the yoke of their industrial overlords. This clash between the industrial elite and the manual laborers will usher in the final phase of communal living, with equal distribution of wealth.*

¹² Sergey Nechayev (1847–1882); Russian anarchist, author of *Catechism of a Revolutionary*

¹³ Edmund Wilson, *To the Finland Station: A Study in the Acting and Writing of History*, Reprint edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 324.

¹⁴ Pyotr Lavrov (1823–1900)

But I say to you that Russia is ripe for change now! Look no further than our traditional, agricultural communes and workshops which already form the vast foundation of the Russian economy. It is not necessary for Russia to adopt the greedy mindset of the Western nations; we can enter directly into the communistic ideal. I am issuing an appeal to enlightened university students to go and live among these noble Russian peasants, and take our message of true communism, and the equality of all persons, directly to those who are already living closest to the ideal to which we all aspire.

Constantine was now getting irritated. He wanted to know why these traitors were being given leave to speak such tripe. It worried him that children were being exposed to these ideas. He became suspicious about the purpose of this museum and thought that the best thing that could happen would be for the figures to be melted down and made into something useful, candles. The Spirit told him that they were nearing the end of their visit and that he predicted that Constantine would appreciate the next figure much more.

Russian Nationalist: All Russians pay heed! What is Russia? Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality! In Europe for a long time there have existed just two real forces, revolution and Russia. These two forces are now opposed to each other and tomorrow they may enter into combat. No negotiations or treaties between them are possible: the existence of one means the death of the other! ...Russia, a country of faith, will not lose her faith at the decisive hour. She will not shrink from the greatness of her calling; she will not shirk her mission. And when could this mission be clearer? One could say that God has written it in fiery characters across the storm-darkened sky; the west is disappearing, all crumbling and perishing in this general conflagration.... And when over this enormous ruin we see rising up like a Holy Ark, this

*still vaster empire, then who will doubt its mission?
And shall we, its children, lose faith and spirit?*¹⁵

Constantine cheered, "Hurrah! At last, you've shown me someone who is speaking sense!" The Spirit explained that this gentlemen represented the group who saw traditional Russia as a type of savior of all of Europe. The revolutions sweeping Europe were destroying God's order. The slogan "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality" was being printed across Russia in newspapers and journals. Its adherents argued that Russia was not like western Europe and would never descend into the types of revolution described by the Marxists or Anarchists. Russia was ordained by God to bring orthodox faith to the world, not revolution. Constantine was heartily cheered by this final speaker and felt buoyed by the thought that Russia would avoid the revolutionary forces that swept Europe. Russia *was* special! God had chosen this people to give the Orthodox Church to the world. Constantine enthused, "I knew that Russia would avoid the heresies and revolutions of the West. There is hope yet! The divine right of the Tsar will remain. The people will stand by their Tsar." But the Spirit looked skeptical. He beckoned for Constantine to follow to their final destination.

Upon arrival at their final locale, Constantine caught sight of a newspaper and saw that the year was 1905. Who was the Tsar, he wondered?¹⁶ He was swept up in a great flood of petitioners heading for the Winter palace square and excitement, tinged with fear, filled him; approaching a battle felt this way. Out front, a priest called Father Gregory led the crowd, like a Russian Moses.¹⁷ Inside of his vestments, he carried a petition to Russia's "little father," begging for better working and living conditions. Having been repealed, the laws of serfdom no longer tied the people to the land, and so they had come to the cities in search of work; the impoverished had traded their wretchedness in the fields for the squalor of the city. Not intended as a revolutionary act, the procession appealed to the Tsar on the basis of their dependency upon him before God. It was freezing. The mothers carried images of their icons, the fathers sang "God Save the Tsar!," and the

¹⁵ Westwood, 39. These lines are taken from an article written during the European revolution of 1848.

¹⁶ Tsar Alexander II

¹⁷ Bloody Sunday, 1905

children watched, wide-eyed. As the crowd convened, Constantine's eyes caught sight of his cherished Russian troops in their rigid formation, smart dress, and armed. Even adorned with snow, the soldiers looked spectacular, like gingerbread men sprinkled with fine sugar. "Spirit, what do they ask of the Sovereign?" queried Constantine. "They desire political amnesty, the separation of Church and State, the eight-hour workday, the transference of land to the people, and the calling of a Constituent Assembly based on universal suffrage," came the reply.¹⁸ At that precise moment, a whizzing sound, reminiscent of gunfire, accosted Constantine's ear. As if struck, a woman fell backwards onto him with a cry. A rifle report rang out, followed by a barrage of gunfire. With no warning, the peasants began to collapse; the army was firing upon the citizens at their sovereign's order.

Grabbing him by the collar of his nightshirt, the Spirit whisked him up and away from the mayhem. The Spirit now delivered words that were measured and forceful: "You have seen with your own eyes that this protest was attended by simple people, not the intellectuals you heard from at the Wax Museum. Marx was wrong to dismiss Russia as a backward country where Communist revolution would never ignite. This was not a small group of intellectuals, or the enlightened gentry, but the desperate people themselves. What the Tsar did today shattered the people's reverence for him. The peasants came in humility, still believing in their souls that the Tsar was the divine authority sent for their good, and he turned his guns on them: fathers, mothers, and children. Upon the peasants' backs Russia is sustained, and when the peasants finally decide to shrug their shoulders, down will topple the empire. Today is the day that they will shrug their shoulders."

After the massacre, the survivors who escaped execution were expelled to the countryside, where they spread their firsthand accounts of the Tsar's brutality. The cherished idea held by the simple masses that their problems could be solved, if they could *only present their case directly to the Tsar*, was dashed in one stroke. As if by wildfire, outrage inflamed the nation: the peasants burned manor houses; railway and postal workers went on strike; and factories were left unmanned. Russia verged on collapse. The Spirit continued, "Today marked the beginning of a true revolution.

¹⁸ Wilson, 491.

Within fifteen years the entire empire will fracture, the Tsar will abdicate his throne, and a student of Marxism¹⁹ will supplant him.”

Constantine began to sweat; he felt the achiness in his bones return. Doubt crept into his mind, and he felt unsure of himself. The Spirit seemed to be showing him the future of Russia, but he was not sure whence this Spirit emanated; it seemed likely that he came from the pit of Hell in light of the heretical picture he was now painting. Constantine thought that he heard Joanna crying, and he found that he was back in his sick bed, wracked with pain. His condition had worsened, but now his mind was also in torment. He thought that perhaps the dream was a warning and he should try to get a message to Tsar Nicholas, but all he managed to say before he died was, “Tell the Tsar to be kind to Poland.”²⁰

¹⁹ Vladimir Lenin

²⁰ Constantine’s final words