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UNDERSTANDING THE

“PHYLOSOPHICAL STEAMBOAT” OF 1922

(in commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the administrative exile of
200 Russian intellectuals by the Bolsheviks)

Life itself sometimes asks people to stop and analyze their past and present in order to think about the future. However, simple analysis of history is not enough for it to have any practical meaning in the future. We have to clearly understand, or at least try to understand, the rules of historical processes, and the links between different epochs. Today, in the times of overall reevaluation in Russia and the integration tendencies coming from the West, this problem is more urgent than ever. Historical analysis for our society is a way to disallow mistakes in the future, and for the world as a whole it is a chance to form a united international community. This process today helps to practically erase rough borders between cultures. While in the past a person was closely tied with his own nation and culture, their own symbols, demons and gods, today these symbols lose their absolute importance.

In 1922 over 200 outstanding representatives of Russian intelligentsia were sent away by the Bolshevik government. This banishment is often mentioned as a tragic event in the history of Russian intelligentsia. Much research

has been made by historians in order to find new documents and analyze the historical facts connected with this tragic event. But it seems we haven't reached a true understanding here as a large array of aspects of this forced exile of intelligentsia requires further research.

First of all, until now together with political and ideological prerequisites of this expatriation, many deep cultural basis have remained untraced. The myth about “very cruel Bolshevik acts towards their own intelligentsia” is often heard. The new historical myths used by the officials, the media, and regular citizens, like ancient myths, calm the society. Binary oppositions of the “friend-foe” type are used to form and spread such myths. Both elements of the opposition are different at various epochs. G. Birline affirms that such mythology is the basis for the nation and its government.

Each myth can be split into several levels, the first of which is the “archetype”, which denotes basic emotions, such as happiness, surprise, anger, hunger, etc. This level is similar in all nations and cultures. That is why the simple “friend-foe” opposition can be easily found in any nation in any epoch. Specific historical atmosphere only slightly alters this opposition.

Slavic, especially Russian, historical, geographical, political and religious factors (such as the length of borders, the Mongol-Tartar Yoke, etc.) seriously strengthened this type of opposition. This archetype has always been very strong in Russia, which is connected with the very basis of Russian civilization.

All the time until the 20th century Russia, being a nation with a very large percentage of peasantry, was based on the myth, the basis of peasant culture. The “friend-foe” opposition has always been very strong in peasant culture, which was used by the Bolsheviks in calls for cleansing the “state of workers and peasants” from the “alien elements”.

Barely studied as a separate problem, the deportation of dissident intellectuals in 1922 was always considered a strictly political problem. But the political aspect does not give full understanding of the fact that such actions could only be based on consciousness of the masses.

Secondly, forced exile is possible only when there exists an idea of the enemy. It would not have been possible if the ideas of social freedoms had been developed in Russian social consciousness. The action was based on so-called “revolutionary law”, which gave absolute freedom against so-called “class enemies”. Some Bolshevik leaders thought that while living in the West the intellectuals will understand their errors and joyfully meet the victory of world proletarian revolution.

Thirdly, we must understand that for many exiles this was practically the only way to save their lives. While the Bolsheviks considered the steamboat punishment of the dissidents, for many intellectuals it was the symbol of attaining freedom.

Recent articles about the exile define it as the “beginning of mass repressions” by the Soviets, initiated by L.D. Trotsky. There is also an opinion that the

action was undertaken by I.V.Stalin during Lenin's illness. Other theories name G.E. Zinovyev the initiator of the exile or attempt to reconsider the role of V.I. Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders in this action.

Many documents are still inaccessible for the researchers, but Lenin's letters to F.E. Djerginsky in 1922 in which he talks about deportation of writers and professors aiding the counterrevolution, about confronting propaganda, and wider use of executions and their replacement by exile, can be considered some of the most important documents on the subject.

From the letters and articles that were later written by the exiles, we can get many facts, such as that the lists of persons to be exiled could hardly be called objective, that for many intellectuals the exile was actually fulfillment of their wishes, that mostly the exiled did not oppose their deportation, understanding that their only alternative was execution, and that only a few of the intellectuals refused to leave the country. We must understand that for the intellectuals the exile was a turning point in their lives, at which some decided to leave, and others decided to stay.

It is quite evident from the accessible documents that most passengers of the "philosophical steamboat" became alien in the Russia Abroad. The documents found in the archive of the Hoover Institute of War, Revolution, and Peace of Stanford University in the United States show that the leaders of Russia Abroad treated the exiles with caution. The Bolshevik attempt to rid Soviet Russia of all that was considered negative was based on the primitive "friend-foe"

grounds. The emigrants treated the exiles from the positions dating back from the Civil War, when the enemies were eliminated physically. The exile did not fit into their ideas. That is why the new exiles were often considered “Bolshevik agents”, which is also an opposition of the “friend-foe” type.

Besides, we have to analyze the changes Russia underwent after the banishment. Many of them can be understood as changes caused by the emigration. Considering the consequences we must define the banishment as an all-national mental, moral, cultural and finally material loss. Russia lost all contribution the intellectuals could have made. These were people able and willing to serve their Motherland. The Russia Abroad, in the other hand, acquired new specialists and higher respect from the others. Expatriation is a sure sign of social illness which was overcome by many countries in the 20th century. But the historical lessons of intelligentsia in Russia and in emigration must be studied further, especially today, when the State Duma, while working on the new counter-extremist law, defines an extremist as a person opposing a representative of the official power.

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