

Russia undergoes 'real deconstruction'

Reflections by Gabriele Liebig on a conference of the Loccum Evangelical Academy on Jan. 27-29, on the theme of "Russia on New Paths."

Neither economics nor politics was the concern of this conference, and also only tangentially the war in Chechnya. Rather, the "non-official" representatives of today's Russian culture, literary people and artists, psychologists and journalists, expressed their views of the cultural situation in Russia. The theme was the intellectual condition of the Russians, how they think about themselves, and current world developments, the deep crisis of Russian identity, as well as whence ideas for overcoming the crisis ought to be sought.

How is the disintegration to be stopped, and the vacuum of the destroyed, discredited values of the former Soviet Union to be filled? Many speakers agreed that there are fundamentally two contrasting trains of thought with their corresponding mythologies: on the one hand, the Slavophiles with the myth of Holy Russia (the Third Rome), and on the other hand the Westernizers, who eagerly flank their reforms in the direction of the market economy, liberalism, and western-style democracy, with the "myth" surrounding Czar Peter I's reforms.

The former tendency was represented in the person of Moscow freelance writer Vladimir Mikushchevich, who, speaking loquaciously and in fluent German, put forward the viewpoint that the Russian people have found themselves since 1917 in a situation of exclusion, and that the First World War never really ended. The certainly correct assertion that the Bolsheviks denied the legitimacy of state power, the idea of law, led Mikushchevich to seek the lost legitimacy of state power in the Russian Orthodox Church. He cited, approvingly, another writer, who in his era preached that the solution was, "All Power to the Patriarch!" But apart from that, Mikushchevich said a lot that was right, especially when he referred to the courageous Patriarch Tycho, who had mounted resistance to the Bolsheviks, or the poet Osip Mandelstam.

Most of the guests from Russia lined up strongly with the Westernizers, upholding universal virtues as opposed to Russian values. The "clodhoppers" (Grigori Pomeranz's term) throw two things in particular up to them: First, the Russians had never had the opportunity to truly experience

universal humanity, because Peter the Great introduced progress by means of slavery. This is in fact a Russian problem. Secondly, the anti-Westerners need only enumerate how much—just in the last three years—of what is most harmful and most destructive has been imported from the West to Russia, in order to silence all counter-arguments. This argument reflects most prominently the present situation of politics, culture, and morality in the West.

"What is new in Russia?" asked Dr. Yevgeni Barabanov, from Bochum. "What is new is what was banned yesterday." Many novelties are of a virtual character: Something is taken over from the West, but only "so to speak," not really. Thus, only "so-to-speak democracy" rules in Russia, and a McDonald's restaurant means "so to speak" that the western market economy has been introduced.

Moscow writer Grigori Pomeranz, who was in a prison camp under Stalin for three and a half years, and later wrote essays which were circulated in *samizdat* proceedings (reproduced through mimeographed copies), and was only allowed to publish again in 1988, contrasted the two tendencies. The admirers of everything western let themselves be bewitched like teenagers by the allure of western consumption. Thereby they overlook not only the problems which are associated with it, but also the western work ethic, which is necessary for creating the economic basis for prosperity. The other side of the coin is hatred for everything western. In this connection, Pomeranz mentioned the filmmaker Stanislav Govorukhin ("The Great Criminal Revolution"), who gets right to the point in depicting many symptoms.

Pomeranz distinguishes three ideas of the state, which have left their stamp on Russian history: 1) the concept of the state of Ivan the Terrible, who wanted to make Russia into an empire after the Byzantine model, but organized it like a monastery; 2) the "Holland Utopia" of Peter the Great, who erected a new state on the ruins of the "Third Rome" and thereby was quite sure that greater Russia would never vanish into Europe; and 3) Lenin's idea of the rule of a "new type of party." But whereas earlier, great suffering was produced by the violent "Slavic" transformation of certain ideas, today we must speak of the "destructive power

of the lack of ideas.”

The old man sadly stated that in Russia the “indolence of disintegration” rules; everything which has become habitual to the Russians today, leads to ruin. In literature, the desire for extinction reigns and is seamlessly completed by the chauvinistic search for scapegoats. One cannot solve the Russian identity problem by making idols of the typical Russian character peculiarities. Hope for a solution to the crisis is offered uniquely and alone through a spiritual and ecumenical dialogue.

Here once again the question is posed: What is the West bringing into this dialogue, and what should it bring? While rejecting all tendencies to a narrow-minded Slavophile outlook, Pomeranz points out that hand in hand with cosmopolitan liberalism goes a misunderstanding of freedom as irrationality, such as the free circulation of pornography, the emancipation of homosexuality, post-modernism, and deconstruction—achievements which western civilization can hardly hold up with pride.

Western post-modern fashions

Dr. German Ritz from Zurich, who reported on the new literature in Russia, Poland, and Chechnya, also discussed this “new wave,” which is coming from America and “Mitterrand’s Paris” (e.g., Jacques Derrida): The post-modern cannot formulate anything revolutionary or new, but only dissolve. The post-modern is the culturally pessimistic return of the always-monotonous and of meaningless husks of words.

In the course of the two days of discussion, it became clear that post-modernism and deconstruction (Derrida) are really the last thing which intellectually interested Russians of the younger generation need and want. Moscow psychologist Dr. Aleksandr Orlov said that Russia can do nothing with post-modern thinking, “because we live day to day in real deconstruction.” In order to survive intellectually, people in Russia are much more “in pursuit of the absolute” again, in the Platonic sense.

Prof. Liubaca M. Moreva from the EIDOS philosophy and cultural center in St. Petersburg likewise wanted to give a polemical rebuff to post-modernism—what western defenders of this miserable fad interpreted as “backtracking.” Post-modernism is the mental state of boredom and of the blind alley in which each seeks out his own little niche. The post-modernist wallows in “the feeling of inevitable decline,” she said. Killing and death are thus turned into idols, and thus apparently, the Chechen war comes to be viewed as “an experiment in the post-modern style.” Unfortunately, Dr. Moreva delivered all of this in the barely tolerable, cynical, wasted language of post-modern deconstruction.

Most of the conference participants had the same perception as myself. Only a pair of diehard representatives of virtual reality in German literature seminars occasionally threw the argument into the discussion, whether Russian

culture should no longer be examined “from the post-modern standpoint.” The audience reacted with some amusement, but in a later workshop, a moratorium on the word “post-modern” was briefly decreed.

Germans in the Russian perspective

It is not useful to recount every single speech, but a very lively closing speech by Dr. Irena Cherbakova on “Germany and the Germans from the Russian Perspective” stands out. She is currently on the Science Faculty in Berlin, and illustrated her topic in German, speaking informally with many examples drawn from her personal experience.

The Germans have always been represented in Russia, she explained, starting with the czar’s family; and everyone already knows Ivan Goncharov’s famous contrast between the German Stolz and the Russian Oblomov. In the natural sciences, especially in physics and chemistry, German has long been the dominant language. Relations between Russians and Germans only really became problematic in the 20th century. In this connection, she named not just the horrors of the Second World War and the pamphlets of one Ilya Ehrenburg, but also Stalin’s NKVD terror, which led to a situation in which anyone who read German books or had a picture of Hans Albers on the wall, was condemned as a German spy. Nonetheless, there are just as many examples for an unbroken positive attitude of Russians toward Germans and especially toward German literature.

Dr. Cherbakova told the story of an argument which she witnessed in the Moscow Metro, which illustrates the deep rift in the Russian identity today. A young man was arguing with an old war veteran, who had angrily exclaimed: “For you we shed our blood in the Great Patriotic War, in order to defeat the Nazis!” The young man’s bitter comeback was: “So what? If you had lost then, it would perhaps have gone better for us afterwards!” This identification with those who were defeated then, but who in the end had it so much better than the victorious Russians, is quite widespread, said the scientist.

The present-day attitude of the Russians toward Germany and Germans is predominantly positive. The Federal Republic of Germany stands as a model of overcoming the past, and people hope that especially the Germans will help them to overcome their enormous economic crisis.

The Loccum conference once again made it clear how much the West could contribute to bettering the situation in the East, provided that we ourselves shift into the right economic and intellectual-cultural position to do so. Hence the real deconstruction in the West—in the financial markets, in production of goods, and in our heads—must also be ended. As long as the only things the West exports to the former East bloc are economic shock therapy and post-modern knickknacks, the anti-western blood-and-soil tendencies will keep gathering strength. And the political consequences of that would be horrifying.