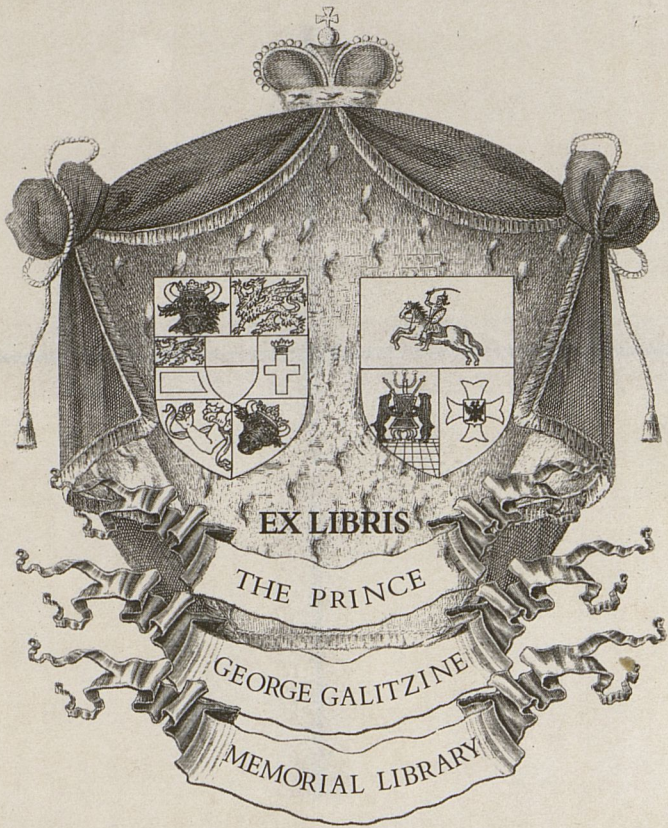


AN INTERPRETATION
OF
THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE

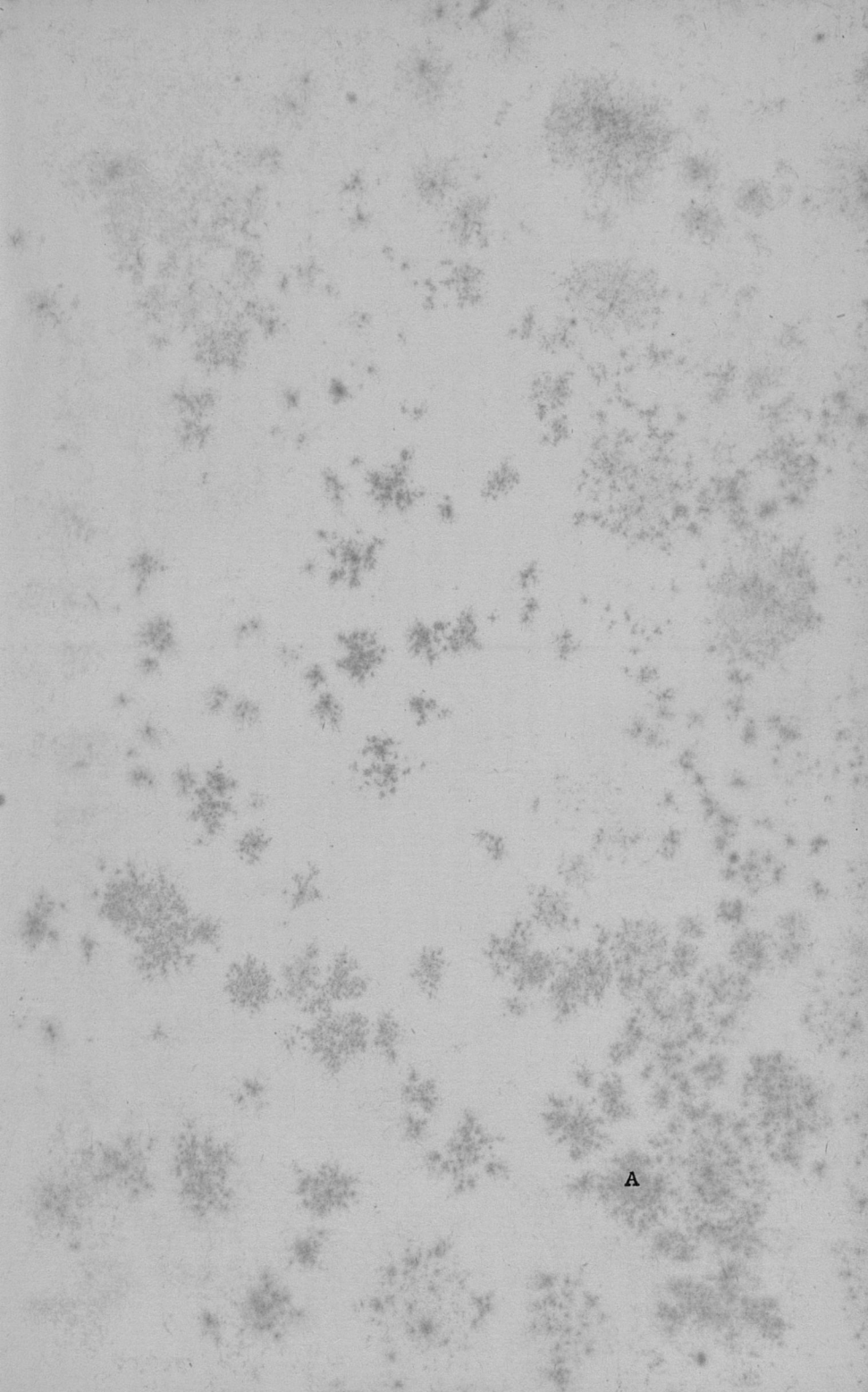
By LEO WIENER

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
SIR D. MACKENZIE WALLACE

C. H. Hansen.



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AN INTERPRETATION OF
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AN INTERPRETATION OF THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE

BY

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With an Introduction by
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PREFACE

RUSSIAN literature has for some time concerned itself with the discovery of the philosophical tendencies in the national life, but in the English language no such comprehensive work exists. The author of the present work does not pretend to give a complete account of the separate activities discussed in it, but confines himself to the ascertainment of those spiritual principles which alone can help the reader to comprehend and properly weigh the curious and frequently unique phenomena in the social and artistic life of Russia. The author has drawn his information not only from his own intimate acquaintance with the country of his birth and education, but also from the great store of special monographs accessible to the Russian scholar. He has attempted, without bias or rancour, to present all the sides of the national existence and to moderate the Russian spirit of self-abasement in the light of Anglo-Saxon objectivity and fairness.

A few words about the spelling of Russian names adopted in the following pages. It is the same as that employed in the author's translation

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of the works of Tolstoy, and is based on the precise rendering of the Russian form, hence the ending *ov* instead of the senseless *off* indulged in by some writers. No attempt is made to give the Russian feminine forms of names, which would only be confusing to an English reader. Hence the title of Tolstoy's work is given as *Anna Karenin*, and not as *Anna Karenina*. The latter is as useless as it would be to mention Madame Tolstoy as Tolstaya. It has also been more convenient and appropriate in many instances to write of St. Petersburg rather than of Petrograd.

THE AUTHOR.

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INTRODUCTION

TO analyse accurately and describe graphically the infinitely varied and often seemingly contradictory manifestations of an individual human soul within the short span of a life-time is an extremely difficult task ; but to analyse and describe the soul of a nation as displayed in the history of a thousand years is an incomparably more arduous undertaking, which requires very exceptional courage and perseverance. Prof. Leo Wiener has made an attempt of this kind with regard to the Russian People, and he may fairly be congratulated on the measure of success which he has achieved. No doubt some of his readers, competent to judge of the result, will not be altogether satisfied in respect of certain details with regard to which a difference of opinion is allowable, but even the severest critics must admit that a valuable contribution has been made to the embryonic science which learned German professors in ante-militarist times used to designate by the uncouth term of *Völkerpsychologie*. In some of the opinions expressed by the author I cannot entirely concur, but I recognise in him an honesty of purpose, a breadth of

view and an analytical talent which deserve high commendation. Born and educated in Russia, he seems to have spent a large portion of his subsequent life in the United States of America, and to have imbibed there a certain amount of distinctively American sentiment ; but during this latter part of his career he has evidently remained in close touch with all the important manifestations of the Russian national character in the realms of literature, art, music, and politics. In short, he has prepared himself, as far as possible, for the arduous task which he has undertaken.

On all readers who have lived in close contact with Russians and studied carefully their national peculiarities a very favourable impression will be made by the opening pages in which they are warned against hastily adopting without reserve the opinions usually expressed by Russians about their own national character and institutions. Strange to say, these opinions are not, as in the case of most other nations, too favourable, but quite the reverse. This strange peculiarity is explained by the inborn, traditional religious humility of the people, and the author might have added that in the educated classes this humility is intensified by extreme doctrinarianism. Having had little experience of practical political life, the educated Russian is in the habit of comparing the native institutions not with what exists in other countries but with the ideals of his imagination,

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and the natural consequence is that he has a tendency to criticise severely and depreciate unduly what he sees around him in the real world. This constitutes, I venture to assert, an important element in what the author aptly terms "the native spirit of self-castigation."

All through the volume the author has kept steadily in view—and perhaps occasionally exaggerated a little in matters of detail—the sound general principle that in national development as a whole, as well as in all its branches, moral, intellectual and artistic, there is always a large amount of indestructible continuity. This continuity he endeavours to follow out and explain from the dawn of history down to the present day. In the modern peoples—the French, for example, the Celtic Irish and the Prussians—he detects the existence of distinguishing characteristics inherited from their remote pagan ancestors. So also in the Russians. They, too, have had a checkered national history. In the eighth century they were a conglomeration of insignificant, barbarous tribes inhabiting the undefined region of the Upper Volga, and now they have become the dominant population of a mighty Empire ; but all through that period of more than a thousand years their essential national characteristics have been preserved. So, at least, our author maintains, and as he cites the facts on which his thesis is founded, readers can draw their own conclusions.

After a rough diagnosis of "the Russian Soul," a series of chapters are devoted to the currents of ancient Russian life, to the national ideals in Art, Music and Religion, to the peculiar relations between the educated and the uneducated classes, to the essential characteristics of the peasantry, to the position and influence of women, and finally to the non-Russian populations of the Empire. In dealing with these various subjects the author shows remarkable objectivity and impartiality, but in some of the later chapters I have noticed a departure from this detached attitude. What here disturbs the calm atmosphere of his Olympian serenity is his love of democratic institutions and his dislike of autocratic rule in all its forms. Under the influence of this sentiment, he has not, in my opinion, fully recognised the all-important part which the Autocratic Power has played in the historic development of the nation, and I consider that in some passages, when criticising severely the mistakes committed by the Government in recent years he has failed to make due allowance for the difficulties with which it had to contend. Occasionally he goes so far in this direction as to adopt the ordinary condemnatory phraseology of the Revolutionists, with whom he is evidently in sympathy. In speaking, for example, of the recently created Imperial Duma, he does not perceive that, notwithstanding its constitutional limitations, its inherent defects and its youthful errors, it has made

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a great advance in the direction of Constitutional Government, whilst the forbearance shown to it by the present Emperor indicates a decided improvement in the traditional attitude and methods of the Autocratic Power in its relations with the liberal aspirations of the people. Impartial, competent observers, who compare the reign of Nicholas II with that of his father Alexander III, and still more if they compare it with that of his great-grandfather Nicholas I, must admit that our new Allies have made in recent years very great political progress, with which moderate, liberal Englishmen cannot but sympathise. In this matter Prof. Wiener unwittingly affords in his own person an interesting illustration of the continuity of national characteristics. Despite his long residence in foreign countries and his emancipation from many old prejudices, he is evidently still under the influence of early environment—still a Russian doctrinaire of the revolutionary type, imbued with that “native spirit of self-castigation” against which he has rightly warned his readers in the opening pages of his volume.

From the British point of view this flaw in the severe objectivity of the work is not of much importance. In any case, Englishmen who wish to study seriously and thoroughly the national character and peculiar historical development of the Russian People must be grateful to the learned professor for supplying them with a mass of

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carefully digested material and many valuable
suggestions such as they will find nowhere else
in the literature of the subject.

D. MACKENZIE WALLACE.

22nd May, 1915.

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I

THE RUSSIAN SOUL

SEVERAL years ago I asked Professor Milyukov, the distinguished historian of Russian civilization, what English book he considered the best as regards its analysis of modern Russia. Without a moment's hesitation, and with a twinkle in his eye, he answered : " E. J. Dillon's *Russian Characteristics*." *

The reply betrayed a distinct Russian attitude towards censure, for a more incisive condemnation of everything Russian could hardly be imagined, and any one other than a Russian would have blushed with shame and burned with indignation at the very mention of that brilliant Irishman's mordant attack upon his nation. But Milyukov does not stand alone in his conviction, for although Dr. Dillon is known to Russian society and to the Government as the author of these sketches, he continues to live in Petrograd as an honoured man and perfectly secure in his Avestan studies.

* E. B. Lanin (pseudonym of E. J. Dillon), *Russian Characteristics*, London : Chapman and Hall, 1892.

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It is a sad fact that there is not a statement made in that book that can be gainsaid, not an accusation that is not true in itself, and yet the whole work fails to give a true insight into the Russian soul, because the likeness is too photographic to be just, too much based on the striking vices to represent the imperceptible and all-pervading virtues. The author has written as a flagellant Russian for flagellant compatriots, and nobody knows that better than he himself, for he specifically says in the preface that his aim was to reach the Russian Government. " My aim, as affecting the Russian people, was twofold : on the one hand, to direct the attention of the Government to the miserable lot of the peasantry, in the hope of obtaining for them some moderate measure of relief ; and on the other, to show that the people, improvident, shiftless, superstitious and immoral though they appear from our lofty English point of view, are yet not undeserving of a certain subdued admiration for having steered clear of still greater abysses in which almost every other people in like circumstances would probably have been swallowed up. And in neither of these respects, I am pleased to think, have my efforts been wholly thrown away. The articles, which to my own knowledge were carefully read by the highest dignitaries of the Empire, were in due time followed by a few slight improvements."

Dr. Dillon is absolutely right when he lays the

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blame for the demoralization of the Russian people which finds its expression in fatalism, improvidence, dishonesty, sexual immorality, lying, and drunkenness, on the blighting influence of a Government of absolutism, arbitrariness, and excessive paternalism. But there are also Russian historians who, recognizing the low standards of the Government and the nation, are at a loss to determine whether the nation has a Government that it deserves, or whether the latter is to be considered the cause of the nation's moral degradation. The moment we try to get at cause and effect in this matter, we start a vicious circle from which there is no issue. Dillon is right, not in locating the source of the evil, but in recognizing the fact that the Government is failing in its duty to enlighten the masses and to bring out what there is confessedly good in them, a duty made the more easy because the people are ready blindly to follow the behests of authority.

However, when Dr. Dillon arrays an enormous quantity of well-attested facts in proof of the low condition of the people's character, he unwittingly becomes guilty of an illogical conclusion, even because he quotes exclusively from Russian periodical and literary sources. His thesis being that all Russians are liars and immoral, what truth can there be found among writers who are by him represented as possessed of the same easy morals? Is it not rather a fact that Russians gloat over

the recitals of their shortcomings and make their foibles and sins "visible," while other nations, not more impeccable, hide their weaknesses under a cloak of sanctimonious proprieties ?

A German professor has characterized the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries in Western Europe as a period when people did not wash themselves any too much but perfumed themselves abundantly. It is precisely this difference between the East and the West in Europe. The Russians have never taken seriously to wigs, powderboxes, and paint, hence their bodily uncouthness and uncleanness was as much a subject of ridicule and contempt to the Western writers of those days as their moral iniquities are exaggerated to-day, on the basis of the Russians' own statements. This, indeed, may be proved by many specific instances.

Nowhere is there supposed to be so much drunkenness as in Russia, but the fact is that nowhere is so much drunkenness "seen" as in that country, for, if statistics be consulted, it is soon found that there is four times as much pure alcohol consumed per head in England, and nearly six times as much in France, as in Russia, and the present wholesale abstinence from intoxicants, even though it should not prove to be permanent, is a phenomenon totally unthinkable and unobtainable in any other country,—a *prima facie* evidence that a drunken Russian must be judged

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differently from an ale-drinking Englishman, absinthe-tipping Frenchman, or beer-logged German. Yet England, France, and Germany are supposed to represent a higher degree of culture than benighted Russia. The difference is merely this : in Russia the drunken peasant wallows in the gutter, while elsewhere the tongue is unloosened in snug ale-houses, smoke-filled rathskellers, and sumptuous cabarets, not only under the influence of liquor, but also of salacious songs and "soul-stirring" music. In Russia drunkenness is drunkenness pure and simple, an abhorrence to native and foreigner alike.

Much is made of Russian dishonesty in commercial, political, and social life. The Hanseatic League found it hard to deal with the cheating Russians, and the newspapers are full of accounts of common transgressions, such as would not be thinkable in Germany, England, or the United States. But commercial honesty is the *sine qua non* of nations with a strongly developed industrial system, and grows with international relations. The student of mediæval economics knows only too well that the Hanseatic cities and industrial centres in the Lowlands were given to far more objectionable practices than any they described in the Eastern staples. They had constantly to legislate against the use of inferior materials in the manufacture of cloth, and false labels and imitations were an art of which the simple-

minded Russians were totally ignorant. But it is significant that the Russian word for "fool" is derived from an inferior woollen cloth which was foisted upon them by those very Lowlanders who accused them of false weights and impure wool.

The long recital of illegal transactions, winked at by public opinion in Russia, is a tame affair as compared with the gigantic swindles of the Western commercial world. The huge South Sea Bubble has not yet passed from the memory of man. But lately a Danish statesman rifled the state's treasury in order to cover up a series of most questionable business ventures, and the titanic iniquities of several of America's most important industries have been sufficiently ventilated in the courts and in the press not to need especial mention. As in Russia, so in the West, the maxim of the Minister of State, as expressed in his instruction to his son, still holds, "My son, you must be honest, but if you steal, see to it that you do not get caught." It is here where the superiority of Western civilization over that of Russia is most apparent. The Westerner has had too much training, and has too much respect for the law, to show dishonesty in little matters and where it does not pay handsomely in returns. He consults the law before committing the crime, and he generally manages to keep "within the law." The Russian who is obsessed by similar criminal

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tendencies goes about his business in a coarse and vulgar way. He does not cover his tracks long, and he is stupid enough to cheat in small and insignificant matters. If foreigners get worsted by such Russians, they must not forget that *caveat emptor* was not discovered by a Russian legislator, and that there is many an artistic commercial trick that the Russian may learn from Sam Slick and from America's David Harum.

Then there is that universal political dishonesty. But where has the Government not been considered a milch cow, to be regularly and thoroughly milked, in order to keep its udder from bursting? England has but lately had some sad revelations, and Germany has had its Krupp scandal, and what are we to say of America's elastic political conscience? The exercise of the democratic right of suffrage has not led to unconditional honesty, and an American investigator has shown that the average price of a vote in certain States is now \$2.50 and that with triumphant universal suffrage votes may become even cheaper. Nor is there anything in the institution of Rings and Bosses that stands in the odour of sanctity. American municipal governments, the police, the public works, are honey-combed with foul political corruption, but while Anglo-Saxons have occasional fits of moral indignation, after which they fall into a state of quiescence, the Russians, even those who commit the crimes, do