Two Russian Nationalities (excerpts)

MYKOLA KOSTOMAROV

We have seen how even in its childhood, when it was centred in Vladimir, and later, in its youth, when it was centred in Moscow, the Great Russian [despotic] element was inclined to subdue and absorb various neighbouring regions.

The same thing occurred in the religious and intellectual sphere. The Great Russians developed an intolerance of other faiths, a disdain of other nationalities, a very high opinion of themselves. All the foreigners who visited Muscovy in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries were unanimous in saying that the Muscovites looked down on other faiths and nationalities. Even the tsars, who in these matters were marginally better than the masses, washed their hands after having touched foreign ambassadors of the various Christian faiths. The Russians disdained the Germans who were allowed to live in Moscow, and the clergy cried out against dealing with them. A patriarch who in an unguarded moment had given them his blessing later demanded that they thereafter be distinguished by their external appearance so that it could not happen again. The Great Russians regarded the Latins, Lutherans, Armenians, and members of all other faiths which differed from Orthodoxy as cursed. The Muscovites thought of themselves as the single chosen people and were even ill-disposed towards other peoples of the same faith, such as the Greeks and the Little Russians. Everything which did not accord with their nationality was subjected to their disdain and considered heretical. They haughtily looked down on everyone.

The Tatar yoke unavoidably strengthened their views. Lenghly abasement under the rule of foreigners of a different religion bred a haughtiness towards and consequently gave rise to the abasement of outsiders. Moreover, a liberated slave readily grows proud. Accordingly, the liberation of Muscovy from the Tatars is what brought on all that enthusiasm for foreign things which took the shape of the reforms carried out during the reign of Peter I. Extremes are expressed in the opposite extremes.

There was nothing of this kind among the South Russian ethnic group. From ancient times Kiev — and, later, Vladimir-in-Volynya as well — was a common gathering place for foreigners of different religions and different ethnic backgrounds. From time immemorial the South Russians had been accustomed to hearing foreign languages and to associating with people belonging to different groups and holding different beliefs. People from South Rus travelled to Greece beginning in the tenth century and probably even earlier. South Russians carried on trade in foreign lands, and served in the armies of foreign rulers. After Southern Rus had accepted its new faith from the Greeks, the South Russians did not adopt the hostility to the Western church which had developed in Greece. The hierarchs, who were foreigners themselves, tried to transport this hostility to the virgin soil of Southern Rus, but they were not completely successful. As a result, Catholic did not have the profile of an enemy in the imagination of the South Russians. People from principally South Russian families married people from ruling houses of the Catholic faith. Probably the same type of thing happened among the common people. Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Germans, Poles, and Hungarians had free access to the cities of Southern Rus and mixed with the inhabitants. The Poles who had come to the land of Kiev to give succour to Prince Iziaslav were entirely captivated by Southern Rus.

This spirit of tolerance, this absence of national exclusiveness later entered the character of Cossackdom, and it remains in the people to the present day. Anyone could enter Cossack society. No one asked about one's faith or nation. When the Poles murmured that the Cossacks accepted various vagabonds and that among these were some heretics fleeing the judgment of the ecclesiastical court, the Cossacks replied that the acceptance of such refugees had long been their custom and that everyone could come and go as he pleased. The hostile acts against Catholics at the time of the Cossack uprisings took place as the product not of a hatred of Catholicism but of oppression, and out of frustration at the violation of Cossack consciences. The expeditions against the Turks and Crimean Tatars were motivated, on the one hand, not by blind fanaticism against the "unbelievers," but by a desire for revenge for their Tatar raids and the taking of Russian hostages, and, on the other, by the spirit of bravado and the desire for plunder which inevitably develops in every military society no matter what its ethnicity or the land on which it was organized. The mem-
The roots of the repartitional village commune lay in the depths of national life. It arose naturally from that very striving for close unity in a single social and state form which, as we have seen, is a distinct trait of the Great Russian character.

In Southern Rus' the peasant could not acknowledge that his landlord embodied the sanctified will of a higher power because he did not understand the idea of specially invested rights in which he did not share. A higher will could not be personified by the landlord because the landlord was simply a free man. Naturally, the slave too wants to attain freedom at the first opportunity. But in Great Russia the peasant could not wish for such a thing because there his lord too was dependent on someone else's will, higher than his own, just as the peasant was dependent on him.

It rarely happened among the South Russians that a peasant was sincerely devoted to his lord and was tied to him without a necessity for his being so. Among the South Russians there was nothing of the filial love we often see in the world of the relations of lord and peasant or lord and servant in Great Russia. We find moving examples of this kind of thing among the Great Russians. The Great Russian serf, servant, or slave is often devoted heart and soul to his landlord, even when the landlord places no value on his devotion. He looks after the landlord's goods as he would his own, and he rejoices when he has an ambitious lord who is granted some honour. On occasion we have seen servants to whom all manner of business properly the landlord's has been confided. These trusted servants were themselves rogues and were ready to dupe anyone if it was to the master's benefit, but in their relations with the master they were honourable and straightforward.

The Little Russians, in contrast, justify themselves by the proverb 'No matter how well you feed the wolf, he always has an eye on the forest.' If the enserfed peasant does not deceive the lord, it is because he deceives no one. But if he has a taste for deception, he will deceive his lord before anyone else. How often we hear complaints against the Little Russians from those landowners who are of Great Russian origin and have acquired populated estates in the South Russian region. In vain have they tried to win their serfs' trust by good and just treatment of them. Work for the landlords has always been done reluctantly, and that is why the conviction has spread among us that the Little Russians are a lazy people, that they are neither sincere nor loyal, that only fear works with them, and that therefore a good landlord is a severe one. These imported lords usually try to surround themselves with Great Russians and keep
or three times or to make the sign of the cross with this finger or that finger. And if such a question arises, it is enough for them to listen to the explanation of the priest, who has been given the authority to discuss these things by the church. If the question arose of some kind of change in the external forms of the Divine Liturgy or in the translation of the Holy Scriptures, the South Russian would not object to it and would not see it as some kind of distortion of the things he holds sacred.

The South Russians understand that the church has set forth these externals and that they have been established by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which has tried not to change the essentials. They understand that the laity must follow these changes. That is because if one or another external represents one and the same essence, the external itself is not so important as to become the subject of discord.

We have had the opportunity of speaking with religious people of both these nationalities. The Great Russian, on the one hand, displays his piety in discussions concerning externals and letters and places great importance on them; if he is firmly Orthodox, this Orthodoxy consists primarily in the external side. The South Russian, on the other hand, will stress his religious-moral feeling and, rarely embarking on an analysis of the Divine Liturgy, rituals, and church festivals, will give only his pious impression of the liturgy, the majesty of the ritual, and the great significance of the festivals and so forth. Moreover, the educated class among the South Russians does not treat the faith as lightly as does that of the Great Russians. Scepticism enters the soul of the South Russian only after a long and deep struggle. In contrast, we have seen Great Russian young people who have been brought up in the strictest piety from childhood on and who have adhered to all the prescribed church rules, but who at the first slight attack, and often as a result of a few sharp words, discard the banner of religion, forget the teachings of their childhood, and without a struggle directly turn to the most extreme disbelief and materialism.

The South Russian people are a deeply religious people in the broadest sense of the term. Somehow, circumstances made them such. Though they adopted one form of education after another until the sum of the principal traits which form the essence of their nationality came into existence, through it all they preserved the principle of religion. This was inevitable given the poetic bent that marked their spiritual composition.

In the realm of social ideas, history has made an impression on our two nationalities and given them ideas which are completely contradictory. The urge to unite individual parts into a whole, the denial of personal interests in the name of social good, the belief in an indestructible common will based on a keen sense of a hard, mutual lot — all these features manifest themselves in the large family life of the Great Russians and the engulping of personal liberty in the idea of the mir, or repartitional village commune. These things are expressed in the national way of life — in the indivisibility of family and of common property — and in the division of responsibility in the villages, where the innocent pay for the guilty and the industrious work for the lazy. One can see how deeply embedded these ideas are in the Great Russian mentality in the fact that Great Russians of various points of view have in our times, under the influence of old Muscovite Slavophilism and modern French socialism, spoken in favour of the communal institutions of the esered peasantry.

There is nothing more difficult or more objectionable for the South Russian than this communal family system. South Russian families divide and go their separate ways as soon as their members find it necessary to establish an independent life for themselves. Parental care for grown children seems unbearable despotism to the South Russian. The pretensions of older brothers over younger ones, and of grandfathers over their relations, arouse an enraged hostility between them. Blood ties and common lineage seldom bring agreement and mutual love to the South Russians. On the contrary, modest, gentle, and likeable people often are separated from their relations by an implacable enmity. Family quarrels are a common occurrence among both the lower and the upper classes. Family ties among the Great Russians, in contrast, often lead a man to live in a friendly and amiable way with his relations even when he does not display friendliness and amiability in his relations with outsiders generally. In Southern Rus', to preserve love and concord among them, it is necessary to separate close relations so that they will have as little contact as possible with one another.

Reciprocal duty, based not on free agreement but rather on preordained necessity, is a burden for the South Russian, whereas more than anything else it is a calming element for the Great Russian and tranquillizes his personal desires. Out of obedience to duty, the Great Russian is ready to force himself to love his close relations; he submits to them simply because they are related to him and even though they are not sympathetic to him. He is ready to make personal sacrifices for them while recognizing that they are not worth it — they are, after all, his blood relations.

In contrast, although the South Russian, apparently, is prepared to love those close to him because they are his relations, such relations are less tolerant of his weaknesses than those of those of an outsider. In general, a common origin prompts the South Russian not to strengthen something
believes because belief is necessary for the explanation of phenomena which cannot be understood, and not to satisfy a desire to raise gay material life to the sphere of free creativity. In general, he has few fanciful tales. His devils, his spirits gathered about the home, are highly material. The Great Russian is little occupied with the other world and the world of spirits and tells very few stories about life beyond the grave. If one does encounter one, it has been taken out of a book, either old or new; and most likely the story has an ecclesiastical rather than a folklorish ring to it.

The Great Russian is very persistent in his prejudices, however, and this accords with his spirit of intolerance. I have known a highly characteristic case wherein a certain gentleman was accused of atheism and profanity because he had a scornful attitude towards belief in the existence of devils.

Among literate people interested in books, one can observe what kind of book the Great Russian is interested in, and, in particular, what in these books attracts him. As far as I have been able to see, his interest is either in serious books directly related to his occupation and, indeed, what he can make most immediate use of, or in light, entertaining reading which occupies him for a while without affecting his disposition or his ideas. Poetry is read simply to pass the time (and in this case is likely for what can be extracted easily from the variety or uniqueness of its composition) or just to show that the reader is cultured enough to read what is considered good. One can often find a person enthralled with the beauty of poetry, but on close look one sees that this is mere affectation and not a true feeling. The affectation itself is a sign of the absence of a true understanding of poetry. Such an affectation is exceedingly common in our educated society. For this reason, it seems, we have a noticeable sympathy for the French, much more so than for other nations, because that people has shown itself to have little that is poetry about it, and in literature, in art, and even in scholarship does a lot for effect.

If among the Great Russians there has been a truly great and original poet and a man of genius, it was Pushkin. But in his eternal masterpiece, *Eugny Onegin*, he outlined only half the Great Russian nationality, the so-called educated and secular class.

There have been successful Great Russian writers who have dealt with manners and morals, but they have not been creative poets who spoke the language of the masses, and said what the masses would have wanted to say, and expressed what their true feelings would be, and done it for each one of them, and, moreover, said it in poetry rather than prose. We repeat, however, that we are very far from saying that there is no poetic element in the Great Russian people. On the contrary, it might be that they have a poetic element loftier and deeper than that of the Little Russians. But it is not oriented towards the spheres of imagination and feeling, and it deals instead with will and clear thinking. Great Russian songs are not immediately likeable. One has to study them and penetrate their spirit in order to understand their original poetry. Such poetry is not immediately accessible because it still awaits grand souls who will turn it into works of great artistic merit.

In the sphere of religion we have already shown the sharp difference between the South Russian and the Great Russian nationalities. This difference lies in the fact that the former has taken no part whatsoever in schisms and desertions from the church on the basis of ritual and formula, whereas the latter certainly has. It would be interesting to resolve the question of where the Great Russians originally got this disposition. In other words, where did they get the tendency to argue about the literal and give dogmatic import to what is often no more than a simple question of grammar or ceremony? It seems that this tendency arises from the same practical, material character which is the essence of Great Russianness. By the same token, when we observe the great Russian people and all strata of Great Russian society, we often meet individuals of true Christian morality whose feeling for religion is directed towards the practical application of Christian goodness, but who, nonetheless, have little 'internal' piety. We also meet hypocrites and fanatics who closely follow external rules and rituals but are also without internal piety; they follow external forms because it is their custom, but they give little thought to why they are doing so. Finally, there are the people of the so-called educated classes, people who have either little faith or no faith at all. They are not like that because they have undergone a deep intellectual struggle; instead, they are enthusiastic about their unbelief because it seems the mark of an enlightened man. (In general, a truly pious disposition is the exception among people, and piety itself, spiritual contemplation, is no indicator of nationality or of a general national character, but rather a result of one's individual and personal character.)

We meet the exact opposite among the South Russians. In other words, the South Russians have exactly what the Great Russians lack. The South Russians possess a strong sense of the ubiquitous presence of God, know an internal turning towards God, and have spiritual affection; they secretly reflect on Divine Providence and themselves; they have a heartfelt attraction to the unknown, secret, and comforting spiritual world. The South Russians follow rituals and respect formulas, but do not criticize them. It would not occur to them to think about whether to sing the 'Alleluia' two
South Russian song. South Russian poetry is inseparable from nature; it brings it alive and makes it a part of the joy and the grief of the human spirit. The grasses, the birds, the animals, the heavens, morning and evening, spring and the snow — they all breathe, think, and feel together with mankind. Sympathy, hope, and judgment are all echo in nature's charming voice. Amorous feelings, which usually make up the soul of folk-song, rarely overcome materialism in Great Russian songs. Such feelings, however, reach the highest expression, purity, and grace in South Russian songs. In comic songs even the carnal side of love is depicted with a convivial analarctic grace, which conceals triviality and ennobles sensuality.

In Great Russian songs woman seldom rises to her human ideal; her beauty is seldom taken beyond motherhood; amorousness rarely goes beyond the corporal; and the valour and worth of the feminine spirit are rarely expressed. By contrast, the South Russian woman of folk poetry reaches the spiritual beauty which in her very fall poetically expressed her pure nature, and displays modesty in the midst of decadence.

The contradictions between the natures of the two ethnic groups are vividly expressed in their playful and comic songs. In South Russian songs of this type, nobility of word and expression is worked out and reaches true artistry. The man who breathes in nature is not satisfied by simple amusements but recognizes the necessity of giving nature an artistic form which not only distracts but elevates the soul. Happiness seeks to embrace nature with verses of beauty and to sanctify the thought of it.

By contrast, Great Russian songs of this genre arise out of nothing more than the desire of a man tired of his daily toil to forget himself for a moment; such songs neither puzzle one's head nor touch one's heart or imagination. Song exists not for itself but rather as a decoration for a purely material satisfaction and therefore often reaches the point of cynicism.

One can more or less see that Great Russian home and social life lacks the poetry of South Russian life, just as the latter has little that makes up the essence, the strength, and the value of the first. The Great Russian cares little for nature. One very rarely sees flowers around the cottage of the Great Russian peasant, whereas one can find them around every house belonging to a South Russian. Moreover, the Great Russian is often an enemy of vegetation. I have seen peasants cut down all the trees around their houses in the belief that the houses would not look well among the trees. In the villages belonging to the state, when the authorities recently planted some bushes close to the houses, it was very difficult to see them come to bloom, to preserve them, and to prevent them from being torn up by the roots. In the 1820s, when the government ordered that trees be planted along the highways, this was apparently such a hateful novelty in the eyes of the Great Russian people that to the present day one can find their laments and complaints expressed in folk-songs of the most trivial type. There are many orchards in Great Russia, but they are almost all meant to bear fruit for commercial purposes; very seldom are there forest-type trees which are not useful in material life. One rarely meets a Great Russian who recognizes and is charmed by the delights of the countryside, who is carried away in observing the heavens, who is lost in admiration of the reflection of the sun or moon in the crystal waters of a clear lake, or gives thought to the forest when it comes alive with a choir of birds in the springtime. All this is almost completely foreign to the Great Russian, who is immersed in his concerns and the petty needs of his material life. Even among the educated classes, as far as we have been given the opportunity to see, there remains the same coolness to the beauty of nature; moreover, this coolness is sometimes most unsuccessfully and comically hidden by an imitation of the ways of the foreign West, where, as is well known, good manners require one to display a certain love and sympathy for nature.

The Great Russians are deficient in imagination; they have few superstitions but many prejudices. It is at once apparent, however, that the South Russians too have many superstitions, particularly in the western part of the South Russian land (perhaps owing to its distance from Great Russian influences). There, in almost every house you can hear a poetic tale about how the dead come to life in different disguises. These tales vary from a touching story of how a mother who has died comes to life in order to bathe her children, to a dreadful story of vampires who rise at midnight around the crosses of cemeteries and wildly scream, "We want meat!"

To the tales scattered in such abundance throughout a land rich in history should be added the legends of misty ancient times; a complex web woven from the best of the popular imagination can be discerned in these legends, traces of which have been written down by the ancient chroniclers. Quaint customs, assorted charms, the world of ghosts in varying shapes, and apparitions to make the hair stand on end all blend into one artful picture. Sometimes the people themselves do not believe in the stories they tell, yet as long as these stories impart a sense of beauty the people will continue to transform the old content into an ever-newer form.

None of this exists in the case of Great Russia. As we have already stated, there are only prejudices there. The Great Russian believes in devils and in witches because he has had this belief passed on by his forefathers. He believes because he does not doubt their reality; he believes in them just as he believes in the existence of electricity or celestial phenomena; he
of bloody enmity with the Poles has not disappeared from among the people to the present day, but specific enmity against the Roman Catholic faith unrelated to Polish nationality does not exist among them. The South Russian is not vindictive except out of caution born of the past.

The South Russian never regarded either Catholic churches or Jewish synagogues as impure places. He did not spurn eating or drinking or making friends with Catholics and Protestants, Jews and Tatars. But he became more hostile even than a Great Russian if he thought a foreigner had insulted his religion. Just as he accorded respect and liberty to others, so too did he demand liberty and respect for himself.

The difference between the two Russian nationalities, which arose as a time quite distant from us, can be seen from this brief historical sketch. The South Russian group had in its specific character a preponderance of personal liberty, while the Great Russians had a preponderance of communality. The root idea among the South Russians was mutual agreement, which could fall apart if disagreements arose; the Great Russians, meanwhile, strove for a predetermined form which, once set up, could not be abolished. They credited the very establishment of such forms to God, and the forms were consequently above human criticism. In various specific public institutions, the South Russians stressed the spirit, whereas the Great Russians tried to create forms. In the political sphere, the South Russians were able to form a voluntary association which was tied together only in so far as was absolutely necessary and which lasted as long as it did not disturb certain inalienable rights and personal freedoms. The Great Russians tried to form a durable common body which would last forever and was permeated by a single spirit. The South Russians approached federation but were unable actually to form one; the Great Russians actually produced autocracy and a strong state.

The South Russian group had often shown its inability to deal with autocratic state life. This group was dominant in the land of Rus' in antiquity, but when it came to forming a centralized state or perishing, the group disappeared from the scene and made room for another.

In the Great Russian element there is something grand, something creative; there is a spirit of organization, a consciousness of unity, and the rule of practical judgment, which can withstand difficult circumstances. The Great Russian element can seize the moment when it is necessary to act and make use of the opportunity when it is useful to do so. Our South Russian group has not shown itself able to do that kind of thing. Its free institutions have either given rise to a dissolution of public ties or led into a whirlpool of conflicts which have distorted the national historical life. Our past has revealed these things to us about the two Russian nationalities.

In its attempts to create a solid and lasting body which would incorporate certain fundamental ideas, the Great Russian ethnic group has always shown an inclination towards the material and yields to the South Russian on the spiritual side of life and in poetry, which the latter group has developed more fully, more widely, and more vitally. Merely listen to the songs, consider the literary works, and look at the images created by the imaginations of both peoples. I do not say that Great Russian songs are without poetry. Their high poetry lies in their strength of will and in their depiction of the sphere of action, and especially in what they posit as necessary for the attainment of a given goal; it lies in how this people has defined itself in the historical flow of political life.

The better Great Russian songs are those which depict the moments when the people gather their strength, or attain victory, or suffer a mitigated defeat. Accordingly, everyone loves the songs about the robber-heroes who fight both against circumstance and against the social order. Destruction is their element, but a destruction necessary for reconstruction. The latter is expressed by the very structure of the robber bands, which form a certain kind of social unit. And therefore it is not strange when contemplating these robber songs to see the same communalism and the same attempt to incorporate statehood which we find in every expression of the historical life of the Great Russian ethos.

The Great Russian people is practical and pre-eminently material and rises to poetry only when poetry arises out of the course of daily work. The Great Russians work without enthusiasm or distraction. They apply themselves to details and particular parts, and lose the general idea which makes up the essential poetry of every action and every thing. Accordingly, while Great Russian poetry often tries to reach the realm of a grandeur exceeding the naturally possible, it often sinks to the level of simple amusement and distraction. Historical memory becomes transformed into epic and then merely into a tale. Meanwhile, in contrast, the songs of the South Russians hold to reality more firmly and often do not need to be transformed into epic in order to shine forth as brilliant poetry. There is nostalgia and reflection in Great Russian song, but Great Russian song lacks the South Russian pensiveness which seizes us so, which transports our spirits away into the realm of imagination, and which lights our hearts with a kind of supernatural fire.

Nature plays a small role in Great Russian song but a very great one in
A Letter to the Editor of Kolokol

MYKOLA KOSTOMAROV

Dear Sir:

In the thirty-fourth issue of Kolokol you expressed a view in regard to Ukraine which for a long time has been kept by the thinking part of the South Russian people as a precious sanctum of the heart. Please accept our heartfelt gratitude. Along with the store of the many truths you have been the first to utter in print in the Russian language belongs what you said about your native land. Allow me to convey to you, for all to hear, our heartfelt convictions.

The majority of the Great Russian and Polish public are not accustomed to regard us as a separate people, to acknowledge in us those elements of a distinctive life which were cultivated in the past; they are accustomed to doubt the existence of our distinct language and the possibility of its literary development, and in general posit our characteristics as one of the provincial nuances of Russian or Polish nationality. This mistaken view arose from the fact that, to the credit of our South Russian church, everything marked by nobility and privilege was chipped away from our South Russian church and anathemized by that same church. There are no Little Russian nobles, with the exception of a few who lately, realizing the bankruptcy of the institution of the nobility, are turning to the purely native source. But even before, there were no nobles [in our country]; they were foreign, although they were of our blood. Formerly they became Poles, and now they become Great Russians. The Little Russian nationality, as the officials of [Tsar] Aleksei Mikhailovich nonchalantly got used to

1 Kolokol (The Bell) was a journal founded in 1817 by Alexander Herzen (1812-70), the famous Russian socialist and publicist in exile in London.