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OVERCOMING THE PAST AS A CHALLENGE TO THE PRESENT

Introduction

I wish to thank you for the opportunity to present a talk at the Symposium and to speak on the issues that agitate me as a scholar, a Russian citizen and a resident of Europe.

I agree with the key topic for a discussion at the Symposium. Indeed, there is a multitude of cleavages in every nation. The trouble is that they expose in

a socium's life as unregulated conflicts and unsolved problems. The forthcoming 21st century (and the third millennium) pose a question of a bunch of ideas, concepts and fundamental values that should be kept in the future and if this bunch will comply with the high predestination of humankind.

It may be said that the answer to this delicate question is partly connected with the heavy burden of historical cataclysms and mistakes that I dare think every nation has gone through. For this reason, in expressing my absolute solidarity with the Symposium's programme, I am taking the risk of posing a problem of **responsible assessment of the past**.

I have deliberately chosen the link between the past and present as the topic of this talk in a belief that my country is still faced with the need to overcome painful consequences of its historical development after 1917. This problem has internal and external dimensions, connected in turn with the past and the present of the country in general, and its culture, which gives grounds to speak about four projections of the problem itself. I shall touch upon each of these projections.

A basic concept for me will be the notion of the world and European **reputation** of Russia (or the Soviet Union in the recent past). This word is of French origin, but has been borrowed by all European languages as a designation of a good or an ill fame of man in the eyes of surrounding people. When speaking of a country, its reputation will represent an opinion of other European peoples on its merits and faults; it will be a sort of public

assessment determining its international authority, influence and respect among other countries.

Statement One. The Country in the Past (internal aspect)

Reputation is a dependent variable. In part, it varies with a country's past, i.e. peculiarities of its historical path. The Soviet past of my country is ambivalent. It helped to promote the USSR (Russia) to the rank of developed industrial countries and entitled it to the status of a great power. Nevertheless, this occurred at a high cost. It means not so much a monetary equivalent than human sacrifices offered to the altar of Communist idea.

French enlightenment philosophers of the 18th century had much contributed to spiritual liberation of man. Marxism inflated these ideas to the limit and in its theoretical constructions empowered man with the faculties of creator, demiurge (Gk *demiourgos* craftsman) of history, and entitled him to the rights of a triumphant conqueror of his own nature. Thus, having received a mandate of unlimited powers to re-design social life, man proceeded on to action — a grandiose live experiment over a one sixth of the earth's surface. In this way, natural-language algorithms of history went on side by side with quasi-algorithms written in artificial languages. What was managed by the French astronomer and mathematician Le Verrier (calculating with absolute precision the existence of Neptune by perturbations of Uranus' orbit) proved to be inapplicable to social sphere. Social mechanics is far more complicated than the celestial ones. In all probability, knowledge of “valency” or “atomic weights” of the slave-owning, feudal and capitalist society would

not suffice for a social scientist, should he endeavour to build a periodic system of elements of human *socium*. That is why for such a short time the star of August Comte shone in the sky of the last-century social science — he was captivated by a false magic of social physics. The same threats appeared to be unavoidable for the founders of Marxism and their devoted followers in the Soviet Union and Russia — Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin. The idea of socialist socio-economic formation was *a priori*. The system of socialism (communism) equations they proposed had no rational solutions. A transition from capitalism to socialism by fundamentally anti-capitalist rules — economy without competition and democracy without pluralism — appeared impossible. The society could not be governed by these equations, despite all the efforts of the repression apparatus, and the unprecedented range of the very repression. I should stress one of the most painful social consequences connected with all types of compulsion, particularly in the sphere of economics and politics. The philosophy of total compulsion was aimed at cutting down the value of individual human life and at curtailing human rights.

Everything began with the idea of sacrifice for the sake of revolutionary ideals. Calls for individual sacrifice penetrated deeply into consciousness of the society and left an incurable trace, a trauma in collective memory of generations. The devaluation of human life was affected by deadly combats of the Civil war, especially during the time when the law and the human rights were subordinated to the power of lynching and revolutionary tribunals that punished their victims in the name of the rebelled people. Political repression of the Stalin era, the destruction of the peasantry during the collectivisation period are terrible in themselves as crimes against

humanity. But what is more dreadful is that they gained an ideological justification, came down into every-day consciousness and gave birth to collective philosophy of violence which has not been uprooted so far. As recent events show, this philosophy has materialised itself without much effort in the battles of the Chechnya war, and celebrates an easy victory in organised assassinations. I am deliberately referring to these extreme examples. For there is still a short distance between a butcher and a victim. Still, the probability to face the violence (compulsion) remains high, and political, cultural, national extremism gives birth to itself, if not stimulated from outside, in diverse manifestations and forms. Ultimately, the anti-humanism of the social environment, regardless of the forms it takes, is a threat to man. Its justification has led to the drop of the value of an individual's life on the scale of general human values.

In 1920, the great humanist, scholar and public figure Bertrand Russell (a man who lived to be almost 100 year old!) joined as a reporter a delegation of the British trade-unions to visit Russia. Attending a banquet to welcome the delegation at the Petrograd Palace of Labour, he certainly saw a slogan reading: "We wait for the blow of the English workers on imperialists' teeth" and, leaving room for such a blow, he proposed a plan of constitutional humane socialism — promotion of education of the English workers so that they could manage industry; advancement of workers' self-governance, including control over industries. In such a case, as B. Russell thought, capitalists turning inevitably into drones, would have been dying off as a class [Batygin G.S. *Three Questions of Berthran Russell to Russian Bolsheviks*. In: *Chelovek Journal*, 1991, No. 1. P. 63-64].

A Western historian of the communist movement once noted that socialism is perceived by heart rather than mind. Russell also did not escape this, taking the idea of communism with passion and worship [Batygin G.S. Op. cit., p. 61]. Nevertheless, if not mind but foreboding did deceive him. His book written shortly after the visit to Russia he concluded with the following words, which I am citing from a Russian translation: "The ultimate cause of all the chain of evil lies in Bolshevik view on life: in its dogmatism of hatred and his belief that human nature can be completely changed with the force" [Russell B. *The Practice and the Theory of Bolshevism*. Revised Edition. N.Y. 1964. P. 116]. Even for such an intellectual as Russell, though, these words were just a prophecy. But it is this prophecy that we adhere to when underscoring the past.

Today, it is a norm to abuse loudly the Bolshevik tradition and to picture heart-breaking scenes of the totalitarian society. Criticism of Bolshevism that became possible under *glasnost* is impossible to reject. Tragic historical experience is the fact, but I can not abandon the feeling that many present-day accusers of Bolshevism often go beyond the limits of the legally accepted. Their accusation verdict is cried out publicly, but what is more important is that the accusers frequently claim to be prepared to annihilate the old "evil" in the name of prosperity and happiness of the new "good". Thus, "Bolshevism" goes on in a new disguise, but this time the bearers of the Bolshevik hostility to opponents are its critics shouting on the squares.

Statement Two. The Country in the Past (external aspect)

The belief in force as a method to settle conflicts is essentially typical of the Great Revolutions. Already the German war historian and general Karl Clausewitz, an eye witness of the battles of the French Revolution and Napoleon, wrote that wars for limited concessions passed, once there appeared an opportunity to wage new wars in which all the people, with all its weight, could be thrown on to the scales [Tsybursky V.L. *Super-lengthy War Cycles and the World Politics*. In: *Polis Journal*, 1996, No. 3, p. 29]. Clausewitz proved to be right. Revolutionary and nationalistic politics of many countries in the 19th and 20th century triggered a radical change: it freed war by giving it an absolute appearance. Hence, the statements of the first Soviet military leaders become clear, for whom it was natural to think that “a state under the power of the working class sets a political objective in war not in compliance with its armed forces and resources, but by contrast it must gather sufficient forces for conquering bourgeois states in all the world.” There was no other way for the 3rd Communist International to its cherished goals (The quotation belongs to Marshal M. Tukhachevsky).

Forced export of the world revolution did not occur, but nevertheless no less politically and otherwise dangerous wars for “certain gains” (by terminology of Clausewitz) have been waged indeed. Military support to republican Spain in the thirties was the last and probably the only case in which the manifestation of international solidarity was so natural that it attracted attention of all the world. But already in October of 1939 there appeared reports on the negotiations with Finland about a territorial exchange. The