

**THE RUSSIAN REVOLT, ITS
CAUSES, CONDITION,
AND PROSPECTS**

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The Russian Revolt, Its Causes, Condition, and Prospects by Edmund Noble

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EDMUND NOBLE

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BY
EDMUND NOBLE

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THE RUSSIAN REVOLT.

NOMADIC SURVIVALS.

THE Russian plain, as I saw it almost unintermittingly during a ten days' journey in the summer of 1882, has a strange power of reproducing some of those illusions that are properly called marine. At sea most people have noticed how largely the apparent extent of the prospect offered to the eye of a spectator depends on the state of the waters, or rather upon the particular character of their surface at the moment of observation. Should the waves run high, presenting their optical effect in a comparatively few concentrated masses of large dimensions, the sense of extension is weakened, and the sky line made to assume a nearness not its due. But when the disturbance is over, and there are left only tiny waves, little more than ripples, the horizon seems to have receded to a distance relatively immense. It is this false vastness of surface, suggested to the eye by

great multiplicity and regularity, as well as minuteness, of detail, that gives so much of its aspect to the landscape of European Russia, and to a traveler, plodding day after day over steppe and plain, seems to swell a territory by no means in need of exaggeration into dimensions almost too abnormal for even the imagination. And the sensation is the same whether one experience it in the barren governments of the southeast, or amid the activities of communal agriculturists in the rich regions of the "black earth." Summer or winter, seed time or harvest, the same smooth plateau widens out as the eye follows to its union with the sky, and the same circular rim bounds vision with a line that often looks regular enough to be made the base of an astronomical calculation. Undulations of surface are very rare, and when met with sometimes denote mere fluent masses of sand or mud-dust that have been capriciously arranged by the wind. Interruptions of the monotony are, in fact, so insignificant that, instead of serving as correctives, they actually seem to add to the general sense of flatness, whether it be conveyed by plain, forest, or town.

At a very early period of its history, Russia in Europe was all but overrun by forests. Today the traveler may cross vast tracts of the

country without seeing a single tree. According to some native writers, nothing more is needed than the destruction of a few woods to turn the whole of European Russia into a "desert steppe."¹ The absence of accessible stone formations, and particularly of mountains, is more marked still. Hence, no doubt, the attraction which all hill scenery has to the modern Russian. It is a strange fact, moreover, that to mountain scapes, Russian literature is indebted for some of its finest productions. Exiled, as each of them was at different times, to the Caucasus Mountains, both Pushkin and Lermontov² found rich stores of poetic material in that sublime range. All who know this part of the country will agree with me when I say that scarcely any contrast in scenery can be conceived at all so striking or so likely to preside at the birth of new ideas as the contrast thus offered between the flat land of European Russia and the heights of which Pushkin wrote:—

"Eternal thrones of snow,
Whose lifted summits gloom to the gaze
Like one unbroken, motionless chain of clouds;
And in their midst the twin-peaked colossus,

¹ "Pustinnaya step." St. Petersburg *Novosti*, Oct. 4, 1833.

² Griboyedov, another Russian author, wrote also within sight of the Caucasus his celebrated comedy, *The Misfortune of Having Brains*.

The giant monarch of mountains, Elbrus,
Whitens up into heaven's blue deep."

That mountains are not commonplace objects in Russia, and that the Eastern Slav must travel for them to the Ural chain, to the Caucasus, or to Switzerland, seems even to have attained a certain expression in the proverbial philosophy of the common people, who speak of things at a great distance as "beyond the mountains."¹

To what extent, then, and in what especial manner, has the course of history and civilization in Russia been influenced by physical peculiarities of contour and surface? What does the Great Russian owe to race, and what to geographical position? Underlying all possible answers that may be given to these questions are two facts on which some emphasis should be laid; for not only have the Russians been exposed to a series of peculiar influences not paralleled by any single case of racial development in western Europe, but all Russian phenomena of to-day, be they social, political, religious, or literary, will be found to have a special character, rendering their reconciliation with apparently inter-related phenomena in other countries wholly impossible. M. Pelle-

¹ "Za gorami." This is scarcely related to the German "über alle Berge."

tan¹ says happily that every civilization has an involuntary *collaborateur* within its own territory; and in Russia the influence of this silent helper must have been immense. The "country of plains," as the historian Soloviev calls it, was from the first marked out for a kind of development fundamentally different from that of the older western civilizations. Plains invite to movement and migration, just as hills and mountains attach men to particular spots of the earth's surface. In European Russia this wandering tendency had special circumstances in its favor, since, while it was often nothing more than a protest against absolutism and centralization, it actually formed one of the indispensable conditions of the national development.

Nor could migratory movements fail to be largely promoted by influences such as those of race, intermingling, and environment. Let us suppose for a moment that the Great Russian started his racial career as a genuine Slav of the purest Aryan stock. It by no means necessarily follows that his lineal descendant of to-day has no Turanian blood in his veins, no Asiatic customs in the various forms of his social and religious life. The theory of a pure Slav race of Great Russians has ceased to have attraction

¹ *Profession de Foi du XIX Siècle*. Paris.