

Khrushchev And Alexander Nevsky

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The Catholic Worker, October 1960, 1, 3.

Summary: Retells the non-violent efforts of the 13th Century Russian hero Alexander Nevsky with the Mongol invaders. Notes the parallel to the new United Nations where East and West try to avoid atomic war where there are no victors. Urges the study of history. Keywords: books, Russia, prayer (DDLW #771).

Peter Maurin used to tell us to study history to see how things of the past influence the present so that we could bring about a better future. Also it gave us a perspective. Carleton Hayes, the American historian, told us once at one of our lectures that just as children were given national heroes to emulate, so we should study the lives of the saints. In Alexander Nevsky the Russian we have both hero and saint.

All that I know of the history of Russia is from my reading of the Russian saints, their own writings and their lives. Of course I have read much Russian literature, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, Tolstoi, Gorky, Gogol and this reading has influenced my way of thinking. I have written before in these columns of **The Way of The Pilgrim** and **A Treasury of Russian Spirituality**. And now I have finished two more books this last month, one by our friend, Helene Iswolsky **CHRIST IN RUSSIA**, the History, Tradition, and Life of the Russian Church, published by Bruce, Milwaukee, \$3.95 and the other **SAINTS OF RUSSIA** by Constantin de Grunwald, Macmillan, \$3.50. In both of these books, I was struck by this story of Alexander Nevsky a national hero in Soviet Russia and a saint of the Eastern Church.

Helene Iswolski told of the Mongolian invasion in 1223, how Russia was invaded again and again; and more recent history, the capture of Moscow by the Poles in the seventeenth century, Napoleon's campaigns in the nineteenth, and the Germans in the twentieth. We in America have no such history of war,—never have we been invaded or conquered. Only Southern Americans were defeated by Northerners and neither side has recovered from these scars, and scores of books have come out each year, discussing the conduct of both North and South and the national heroes who emerged. That was a four-year war and recent. The Mongol invasion was centuries ago and continued for centuries, and the story of it has been kept alive in the hearts of the Russians.

But Alexander Nevsky became a national hero through his conquering the Swedish Army, and the Teutonic and the Livonian knights who wore the emblem of the cross on their armor and shields and were considered as missionaries come to Christianize the Baltic regions, which as a matter of fact were already peacefully evangelized. Ignoring the fact that the lands of the Russ had been Christian for 150 years, they looked upon them as schismatics, and hoping

that they were weakened by the Mongol invasion, they invaded their lands after they had conquered the Balkan region. Helene Iswolski compares their invasion to the Panzer divisions of the Hitler Army and the defeat was brought about by weather conditions just as Napoleon was also defeated by Russian climate. The heavily armored knights, on their heavily armored chargers floundered in the deep snow and ice on Lake Peipus and because much of it took place on the banks of the Neva, Alexander was known from then on as Alexander Nevsky. Everyone has heard of the famous Serge Eisenstein film with a score by Serge Prokofiev. "This battle" writes Miss Iswolski "has become the symbol of Russian defense and patriotic valor. It has also, unfortunately become the symbol of the Russian orthodox versus the Catholic attempting to proselytize their people with armed force."

Alexander Nevsky, according to Constantin de Grunwald's book, was the princely saint. His life was written at the end of the 13th or beginning of the 14th century by eyewitnesses to these events. He was born in 1219, and his father was the elected Prince of Novgorod. There were constant disputes between the rich merchants and the craft guilds, between the nobles and the Prince. Alexander began early to know "the horrors of internal dissension, the dangers which threaten the country and the duties incumbent on its rulers. He developed a profound spiritual life; after mastering the first rudiments of his education he would become absorbed for hours at a time in reading the Old and New Testaments."

It was only by a miracle that he escaped death as a youth when the Tartar hordes were halted by the walls of Novgorod in March 1238 and made their way back to the steppes. When Alexander in his turn was called upon to rein and to fight, he did not run away as his father had often done, but "bowing to the divine will, he sacrificed himself for the common good" and undertook the duties of his state in life. He brought about many local reforms in the administration of justice, "but it was particularly as a defender of the material and spiritual patrimony to the nation that he has rendered his name immortal by his victorious resistance to the Swedes, the Teutonic Knights and the Lithuanians and subsequently when he became Grand Prince, by establishing an acceptable *modus vivendi* with the Mongolian overlord." Here was an example of a lifetime of nonviolent resistance to the gigantic armies of the East which were too much for the scattered princes and their armies.

It is a *modus vivendi* that we are trying to achieve at the United Nations today since all nations recognize there are no victors in an atom war. For the USSR strained relations with the West, fear of the East, the conditions are the same. But Western and Eastern Europe are sitting down together at the council chamber, and today the debate is whether the "Mongolian hordes are to be recognized." Is the UN to recognize Communist China? All the rest of the world is against the US in her refusal.

St. Alexander Nevsky had to accept a humiliating role. The conqueror had to accept the position of vassal to recognize openly the loss of Russian independence. "Collaboration with the Tartars was indeed at that moment an historical necessity," de Grunwald writes. The Mongols recognized the valor and the saintliness of the Russian ruler, but they nevertheless made him undertake "the interminable journey through the deserts of Asia and only allowed him to return to his native land after three years absence on three occasions during the following years Alexander had to return to his masters' camp situated to the north of the Azov sea, (Karakorum) to arrange current affairs and also to implore for their mercy for

the people under his government.” After a popular uprising, Alexander made a 4th journey to the Tartars to ward off a punitive expedition. He still was being harried by the Swedes to the North and West. It was at the end of this 4th journey that he died in a monastery, November 1263.

This is not a chapter of his history emphasized by the USSR but it is the story of a warrior saint.

I am not saying that the Mongols were overcome finally by nonviolent resistance but it was the policy throughout Alexander’s lifetime to use every means but open warfare to hold back the enemy. Later, in the life of St. Sergius who is compared to St. Francis in his poverty and manual labor, and who refused all part in the political life of the time, Grunewald boasts of his having blessed the troops for “the conquest of the Mongols in the year 1380.” “Soviet historians,” he writes, “take pleasure in emphasizing the participation of all classes of society in this great achievement; they have carefully picked out the names of simple working people, humble villagers among the heroes of the great battle. But to remain faithful to historical truth the religious element must not be passed over in silence.”

He boasts here, but he points out to that this great victory did not end the war. A few years later the Tartars besieged the Kremlin, sacked the city and the monasteries around it, including that of St. Sergius who with his monks had to flee to the forests.

Later the monasteries, (Holy Trinity was the founder of dozens of others) became wealthy and owned thousands of serfs and tens of thousands of acres, and fell into spiritual decay and were pruned by saints and also by revolution, but the monastery (Holy Trinity) has now been definitely restored to worship once more, and “there can be seen moving about between these buildings the blue domed cathedral which houses the tomb of Boris Goudunov, bearded monks, lay brothers, the students of the seminary and the unvarying crowd of old women and sturdy peasants who have preserved even until our times the tradition of ancient Russian piety. The little Church of the Holy Trinity and St. Sergius is never empty. ‘Here prayers rise up the whole day long,’ according to the Journal of the patriarchs of Moscow in 1946. ‘Here men remain kneeling for whole days before the shrine of the saint. Here is a woman in clogs, a haversack on her back who has come from afar, men and women from the four corners of Russia as in the 14th century, and the glory of St. Sergius of Radonezh. is continually increasing throughout Russia.”

When I read these accounts I am more zealous in my prayers for all those at the UN who are deliberating at this time. St. Paul says, “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all men; for kings and for those in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life in all piety and worthy behavior. This is good and agreeable in the sight of God our Savior who wishes all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one Mediator between God and men, himself man, Christ Jesus, who gave himself a ransom for all, bearing witness in his own time.” –Timothy 2:1 to 7