Literature

[The prompt mention in our list of "Books of the Week" will be considered by us an equivalent to their publishers for all volumes received. The interests of our readers will guide us in the selection of works for further notice.]

RUSSIA UNDER THE TZARS.*

THE sphinx of modern Europe is Russia, and amid all the solutions proposed of her riddle, the question is not which is right, but whether any one or all together give us the truth.

We say all together; for Russia is something like a continent in itself, whose political history is difficult, but whose sociological phenomena are too contradictory to admit of any simple solution. Nothing yet published will compare with Wallace's two large volumes. They are admirable in their wide induction of facts and statistics, and in their reasoning from them, and remain unsurpassed in their way though they may not have "plucked the heart out of the mystery." Nihilism may be the scourge of Russia, but it is also the revelation of Russia. It is the *enfant terrible* who has let out the truth. Clearly as Wallace and others read in the omens indications of trouble ahead, the portraiture of Russia could not be drawn until the Nihilist had begun to act on his underground methods, and until those who carried the discontent of the people in their bosoms had been admitted to testify; for Russia is in the abnormal condition of a country where the grumbler and the revolutionist represent the most important and efficient features of her political sociology.

Among all who have written from this standpoint, no one is entitled to more credit, if any one is entitled to as much, as Stepniak, formerly editor of the *Zemlia I Volia*, and whose latest work, *Russia Under the Tzars*, now lies before us, translated by William Westall, and published in an "authorized edition" by the Messrs. Scribner.

Portions of this volume are reproduced from the London *Times*, and have been quoted and commented on in our columns. It has every appearance of capacity, knowledge and honesty. It is written with moderation, and falls so far short of the extreme revolutionary temper that it complains only of what is plainly intolerable, and asks only for what, under any system of government, whether despotic or not, will have sooner or later to be conceded. Whatever the author's political theories may be, they are not aired in this volume. The heavy charge brought against the Government of the "Tzars" is not that they are "Tzars," but that they misgovern in every sense and in all ways, and that under their system nothing better can be expected. The letters published in the London *Times*, and incorporated into this volume, produced a deep and wide impression in Europe. They even stung the Russian authorities in a point at which, like all conscious misdoers, they are extremely sensitive to the censures of the outside world.

The strength of this volume does not lie in a long list of outrages and miscarriages of the public justice, though, perhaps, rather too much of this old straw is beaten over in these pages. The telling matter in it is first the disclosure of a democratic origin for Russian institutions, together with the identification of something like their survival in the popular feeling and in broken fragments of what they once were.

This subtone of democratic feeling in the Russian people helps us to understand their revolutionary method. Their training in freedom was checked before the moral feeling that is necessary to guide and control it was reached. It was stopped at the stage where men thought it no sin to seek their own by violence, and when it amounted to little more than a strong assertion of personal rights, unmodified by the corresponding feeling of obligation. This is the Irish stage of freedom. It is the survival of the raw, untrained, rudimentary personal freedom of barbarous times, and its reappearance in nineteenth century society.

Had history been propitious, Muscovy might have been trained under law to rational and moral freedom; but, checked and limited on all sides, it is more a testimony to the native vigor of the race that it survived in any form than a wonder that we find it abnormally and even immorally constituted. The Russian peasant is lethargic and slow; but otherwise he should be expected to seek his own very much as an Arab or as the Irish, whose emancipation has made them barbarously alive to their rights, but left them insensible to their duties and their relations to law. This has been too much the trouble with freedom in all Latin countries. It was checked in the purely personal stage, and was not developed far enough under law to become moral, and reach the stage where society can repose securely on it. The Italian liberationist turned naturally to the dagger, and, in Russia, reform is Nihilistic revolution. There is a phenomenal difference in the two methods which is characteristic of the people, but both are survivals from barbarous times of a rudimentary virtue that was checked in its development by the despotic turn of affairs. The only difference between them is that one is Italian and the other Russian.

Stepniak throws light on this point from many sources, especially in his remarks on the *Vetche*. Mr. Wallace may be said to have discovered for us the Russian *Mir;* but he did not associate it with its democratic associate, or free town meeting, the *Vetche*, which was in historic Russia, like the Athenian *agora*, the source of power. It is not strange that it escaped him, as absolutism has broken it up, driven it back, and left it in such a fragmentary and limited condition as to be out of sight to a foreigner. Not enough of it remains to give the people a happy, satisfied, and tranquillizing sense of freedom; but only enough to be a thorn and a reminder.

Stepniak in his next step shows how all this native freedom has been checked and driven back within a recent period, and held in the mediæval stage. It is an old story, and only more shocking than others which are like it, because it has been enacted in modern times, and among a people supposed to enjoy the nineteenth century civilization. It was a process of suppression in which the popular mind was systematically debased and enfeebled. Religion brought in to promote absolutism proved for a long time more efficient than police or army. The alarming feature of the present situation is that it will no longer avail for this purpose. With [illegible] the Church is shaken, and we have in the disclosures of this volume full accounts of the measures relied on by the Government to sustain that mental darkness in the land without which neither police nor army nor both can succeed.

This is the saddest and most terrible part of the whole story, and has been put into operation since 1863. It is not an ancient crime against the people which has the times to plead in its defense. It is a deliberate attempt to transform the universities, the common schools, and the children's primaries into engines for the debasement of the popular mind, and its subjugation to absolutism.

The effect of all this on the people is seen in Nihilism, the most frightful manifestation of the age; but not more frightful and less guilty than the system which produced it. It is far short of the truth to say that Russia is mediævalism subsisting on in our century. If it were really mediævalism the people would be at rest. The national life would flow on free within its banks, and develop into something natural and normal inside its limitations. The root of mediævalism is dead in Russia, as it is elsewhere in Europe. What they are trying to do at St. Petersburg is to force a new growth. It is a monstrous experiment, which, when tried on Tartars and Slaves, results in Nihilism. If anything of the kind were tried on an Arab he would whip out his dagger. Elsewhere in Europe it would result in revolution.

Stepniak traces the debasing influence of this system into Russian life. One overwhelming example he selected from the bulk in the case of the banker Rykov, which, with small acknowledgment of the source from which it came, has lately figured at length in the columns of some of our journals. We need not retell the story here. It shows how Russian society is honeycombed. It is far worse than France was after twenty years of Napoleon III. It is a gigantic fraud. Not a battalion of the army musters in the field a fair proportion of its nominal strength. The commissariat paid for is a very different thing from that the soldiers starve on in camp and barracks. The repression applied by Count Tolstoi to the universities has made it impossible to fill the medical staff with surgeons. The people pine and dwindle under oppressive taxes, which, when they reach the imperial fisc, are insufficient to meet the ordinary expenses in time of peace.

Russia's relation to Europe and England is not the main point of the history, but it receives an incidental illustration which is all the more effective because it is indirect. The interest which civilization has in the predominance of England is the one thing that ought not to escape the reader of this book. It is pathetic to note with what enthusiasm and hope the coolest and wisest of Russia's exiles turn to England and not to France. Of what France has to offer them they have enough already in the fury and heat which reform has assumed in that icy land. It is not much in the way of actual aid or interference that England has to offer. But the one thing she can do is exactly what is needed, and what she has done. She shows the way out. She has given all these people the model of the political organization under which liberty is more secure than under any other—the model of a society in which liberty exists under law.

The service Bismarck has done Russia is less obvious. Stepniak sees no good in it at all. Certainly it is not inspired by respect for any bill of rights, nor any sympathy with oppressed peoples. On broad, European principles it may do more for Russia than Stepniak has foreseen by checking its aggrandizing policy and throwing it back on the necessity of coming to an understanding with its own people. Looked at from the standpoint of economics the Asiatic expansion of Russia is an enormous blunder which weakens the empire in the exact ratio of its progress. But looked at from a dynastic way, and for the moment, it is the one policy which keeps the empire alive. It is a tremendous counterpoise to weigh against the stagnation the political administration has entailed on the people. It keeps the wheels a-going, opens careers to ambitious men, makes an impression on the popular imagination, and gives the Government something to show for itself whose ruinous cost and consequences cannot be exposed within the limits of the empire.

The end cannot be doubtful, and Stepniak, with all his reticence as a prophet, has given, in the story of the banker Rykov, the typical example which prefigures the fate that must come on the Government of the "Tzars." It is an indication of his cool-headed self-control that he has been able to keep his eye on the distinction between the Government and the Czar. He has little hope that the head of all the Russias will ever be strong enough to extricate them from the toils, not at least unless the whole system collapse in such a way as to leave him master of the situation. Still what hope Russia has in the *Zemstvo*, and in the Czars, is about all that remains to relieve the dark picture.

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*RUSSIA UNDER THE TZARS. By STEPNIAK, author of "Underground Russia," formerly editor of *Zemlia I. Volia*, rendered into English by WILLIAM WESTALL. Authorized Edition. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1885. 16mo, pp. 281. $1.50.