

REITH LECTURES 1952: The World and the West

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Lecture 1: Russia

TRANSMISSION: 16 November 1952 - Home Service

When the BBC did me the honour of asking me to give this year's Reith Lectures, I offered, for my subject, 'The World and the West', and I want to say something about this common subject of the whole set of lectures before entering on the question of Russia and the west, which is to be the particular subject of this first talk.

Perhaps you may be asking yourselves: 'Why say "the world and the west"? Is not the west just another name for as much of the world as has any importance for practical purposes today? And, if you feel that you must say something about the non-western rest of the world, why put the two words in this order? Why not say "the west and the world", instead of saying "the world and the west"? You might at least have put the west first'.

Two Essential Points

In writing both the world and the west into my title, and writing the two words in that order, I was doing both things deliberately, because I wanted to make two points that seem to me essential for an understanding of our subject. The first point is that the west has never been all of the world that matters. The west has not been the only actor on the stage of modern history even at the peak of the west's power (and this peak has perhaps now already been passed). My second point is this: in the encounter between the world and the west that has been going on now for 400 or 500 years, the world, not the west, is the party that, up to now, has had the significant experience. It has not been the west that has been hit by the world; it is the world that has been hit—and hit hard—by the west; and that is why, in my title, I have put the world first.

Let us try, for a few minutes, to slip out of our native western skins and look at this encounter between the world and the west through the eyes of the great non-western majority of mankind. Different though the non-western peoples of the world may be from one another in race, language, civilisation, and religion, if we ask them their opinion of the west, we shall hear them all giving us the same answer: Russians, Moslems, Hindus, Chinese, Japanese, and all the rest. The west, they will tell us, has been the arch-aggressor of modern times, and each will have their own experience of western aggression to bring up against us. The Russians will remind us that their country has been invaded by western armies overland in 1941, 1915, 1812, 1709, and 1610; the peoples of Africa; and Asia will remind us that western missionaries, traders, and soldiers from across the sea have been pushing into their countries from the coasts since the fifteenth century. The Asians will also remind us that, within the same period, the westerners have occupied the lion's share of the world's last vacant lands in the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, and South and East Africa. The Africans will remind us that they were enslaved and deported across the Atlantic in order to serve the European colonisers of the Americas as living tools to minister to

their western masters' greed for wealth. The descendants of the aboriginal population of North America will remind us that their ancestors were swept aside to make room for the west European intruders and for their African slaves.

This indictment will surprise, shock, grieve, and perhaps even outrage most of us westerners today. Dutch westerners are conscious of having evacuated Indonesia, and British westerners of having evacuated India, Pakistan, Burma, and Ceylon, since 1945. British westerners have no aggressive war on their consciences since the South African war of 1899-1902, and American westerners none since the Spanish-American war of 1898. We forget all too easily that the Germans, who attacked their neighbours, including Russia, in the first world war and again in the second world war, are westerners too, and that the Russians, Asians, and Africans do not draw fine distinctions between different hordes of 'Franks'—which is the world's common name for westerners in the mass. 'When the world passes judgment, it can be sure of having the last word', according to a well-known Latin proverb. And certainly the world's judgment on the west does seem to be justified over a period of about four and a half centuries ending in 1945. In the world's experience of the west during all that time, the west has been the aggressor on the whole; and, if the tables are being turned on the west by Russia and China today, this is a new chapter of the story which did not begin until after the end of the Second World War. The west's alarm and anger at recent acts of Russian and Chinese aggression at the west's expense are evidence that, for westerners, it is today still a strange experience to be suffering at the hands of the world what the world has been suffering at western hands for a number of centuries past.

What, then, has been the world's experience of the west? I will begin with Russia's experience, for Russia is part of the world's great non-western majority. Though the Russians have been Christians and are, many of them, Christians still, they have never been western Christians. Russia was converted not from Rome, as England was, but from Constantinople; and, in spite of their common Christian origins, eastern and western Christendom have always been foreign to one another, and have often been mutually antipathetic and hostile, as Russia and the west unhappily still are today, when each of them is in what one might call a 'post-Christian' phase of its history. You will, of course, be familiar with the idea that the rulers of Russia have repudiated Christianity since Russia came under a Communist regime, but you may perhaps be surprised—and even a little indignant—to hear me speak of our western community in the same words as being a post-Christian society. When, though, we look into our religious history in the west over the past 250 years, we cannot, I think, fail to see that we too have been drifting further and further away from our western Christian tradition. We may not have admitted this to ourselves and we have not thrown over the outward forms and observances but, if we look into our hearts, we shall see how far we too have moved away from our Christian past.

The on the whole unhappy story of Russia's relations with the west did, though, have a happier first chapter; for in spite of the difference between the Russian and the western way of life Russia and the west got on fairly well with one another in the early Middle Ages. The people traded, and the royal families intermarried. Our own King Harold's daughter, for instance, married a Russian prince. The estrangement began in the thirteenth century, after the subjugation of Russia by the Tatars. The Tatars' domination over Russia was temporary, because the Tatars were Nomads from

the Steppes who could not ever make themselves at home in Russia's fields and forests. Russia's lasting losses as a result of this temporary Tatar conquest were, not to her Tatar conquerors, but to her western neighbours; for these took advantage of Russia's prostration in order to lop off, and annex to western Christendom, the western fringes of the Russian world in White Russia and in the western half of the Ukraine. It was not until 1945 that Russia recaptured the last piece of these huge Russian territories that were taken from her by Western Powers in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Political Unity at - the Price of Autocracy

These western conquests at Russia's expense in the late Middle Ages had an effect on Russia's life at home, as well as on her relations with her western assailants. The pressure on Russia from the west did not merely estrange Russia from the west; it was one of the hard facts of Russian life that moved the Russians to submit to the yoke of a new native Russian power at Moscow which, at the price of autocracy, imposed on Russia the political unity that she now had to have if she was to survive. It was no accident that this new-fangled autocratic centralising government of Russia should have arisen at Moscow; for Moscow stood in the fairway of the easiest line for the invasion of what was left of Russia by a western aggressor. The Poles in 1610, the French in 1812, the Germans in 1941, all marched this way. Since an early date in the fourteenth century, autocracy and centralisation have been the dominant notes of all successive Russian regimes. This Muscovite Russian political tradition has perhaps always been as disagreeable for the Russians themselves as it has certainly been distasteful and alarming to their neighbours; but unfortunately the Russians have learnt to put up with it, partly perhaps out of sheer habit, but also, no doubt, because they have felt it to be a lesser evil than the alternative fate of being conquered by aggressive neighbours.

Russian Submissiveness to Tyranny

This submissive Russian attitude towards an autocratic regime that has become traditional in Russia is, of course, one of the main difficulties, as we westerners see it, in the relations between Russia and the west today. The great majority of people in the west feel that tyranny is an intolerable social evil. At a fearful cost, we have put down tyranny when it has raised its head among our western selves in the forms of fascism and national socialism. We feel the same detestation and distrust of it in its Russian form, whether this calls itself Tsarism or calls itself Communism. We do not want to see this Russian brand of tyranny spread; and we are particularly concerned about this danger to western ideals of liberty now that we Franks find ourselves thrown upon the defensive for the first time 'in our history since the second Turkish siege of Vienna in 1682-83. Our present anxiety about what seems to us to be a post-war threat to the west from Russia is a well-justified anxiety for our belief. At the same time, we must take care not to allow the reversal in the relation between Russia and the west since 1945 to mislead us into forgetting the past in our natural preoccupation with the present. When we look at the encounter between Russia and the west in the historian's instead of the journalist's perspective, we shall see that, over a period of several centuries ending in 1945, the Russians have had the same reason for looking askance at the west that we westerners feel that we have for looking askance at Russia today.

During the last few centuries, this threat to Russia from the west, which has been a constant threat from the thirteenth century till 1945, has been made more serious for

Russia by the outbreak, in the west, of a technological revolution which has become chronic and which does not yet show any signs of abating. When the west adopted firearms, Russia followed suit, and in the sixteenth century she used these new weapons from the west to conquer the Tatars in the Volga valley and more primitive peoples in the Urals and in Siberia. But in 1610 the superiority of the western armaments of the day enabled the Poles to occupy Moscow and to hold it for two years, while at about the same time the Swedes were also able to deprive Russia of her outlet on the Baltic Sea at the head of the Gulf of Finland. The Russian retort to these seventeenth-century western acts of aggression was to adopt the technology of the west wholesale, together with as much of the western way of life as was inseparable from western technology.

It was characteristic of the autocratic centralising Muscovite regime that this technological and accompanying social revolution in Russia at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries should have been imposed upon Russia from above downwards, by the fiat of one man of genius, Peter the Great. Peter is a key figure for an understanding of the world's relations with the west, not only in Russia but everywhere; for Peter is the archetype of the autocratic westernising reformer who, during the last two and a half centuries, has saved the world from falling entirely under western domination by forcing the world to train itself to resist western aggression with western weapons. Sultans Selim III and Mahmud II and President Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in Turkey, Mehared Mi Pasha in Egypt, and 'the Elder Statesmen' who made the westernising revolution in Japan in the eighteen-sixties were, all of them, following in Peter the Great's footsteps consciously or unconsciously.

Peter launched Russia on a technological race with the west which Russia is still running. Russia has never yet been able to afford to rest, because the west has continually been making fresh spurts. For example, Peter and his eighteenth-century successors brought Russia close enough abreast of the western world of the day to make Russia just able to defeat her Swedish western invaders in 1709 and her French western invaders in 1812; but in the nineteenth-century western industrial revolution the west once more left Russia behind, so that in the first world war Russia was defeated by her German western invaders as she had been defeated, 200 years earlier, by the Poles and the Swedes. The present Communist autocratic Government was able to supplant the Tsardom in Russia in consequence of Russia's defeat by an industrial western technology in 1914-17; and the Communist regime then set out, from 1928 to 1941, to do for Russia, all over again, what the Tsar Peter had done for her about 230 years earlier.

For the second time in the modern chapter of her history, Russia was now put, by an autocratic ruler, through a forced march to catch up with a western technology that had once more shot ahead of hers; and Stalin's tyrannical course of technological westernisation was eventually justified, like Peter's, through an ordeal by battle. The Communist technological revolution in Russia defeated the German invaders in the second world war, as Peter's technological revolution had defeated the Swedish invaders in 1709 and the French invaders in 1812. And, then, a few months after the completion of the liberation of Russian soil from German western occupation in 1945, Russia's American western allies dropped in Japan an atom bomb that announced the outbreak of a third western technological revolution. So today, for the third time,

Russia is having to make a forced march in an effort to catch up with a western technology that, for the third time, has left Russia behind. The result of this third event in the perpetual competition between Russia and the west still lies hidden in the future; but it is already clear that this renewal of the technological race is another of the very serious difficulties now- besetting the relations between these two ex-Christian societies.

Technology is, of course, only a long Greek name for a bag of tools, and we have to ask ourselves: what are the tools that count in this competition in the use of tools as means to power? A power-loom- or a locomotive is obviously a tool for this purpose, as well as a gun, an aeroplane, or a bomb; But all tools are not of the material kind; there are spiritual tools as well, and these are the most potent that man has made. -A creed, for instance, can be a tool; and in the new round in the competition between Russia and the west that began in 1917, the Russians this time threw into their scale of the balances a creed that weighed as heavily against their western competitors' material tools as, in the Roman story of the ransoming of Rome from the Gauls, the sword thrown in by Brennus weighed against the Roman gold.

Communism, then, is a weapon; and, like bombs, aeroplanes, and guns, this is a weapon of western origin. If Communism had not been invented by a couple of nineteenth-century westerners, Karl .Marx and Friedrich Engels, who were brought up in the Rhineland and spent the best part of their working lives in London and in Manchester respectively, Communism could never have become Russia's official ideology. There was nothing in the Russian tradition that could have led the Russians to invent Communism for themselves; and it is certain that they would never have dreamed of it if it had not been lying, ready- made, there in the west, for a revolutionary Russian regime to apply in Russia in 1917.

In borrowing from the west a western ideology, besides a western industrial revolution, to serve as an anti-western weapon, the Bolsheviki in 1917 were making a great new departure in Russian history; for - this was the first time that Russia had ever borrowed a creed from the west. We have already noticed that Christianity had come to Russia, not from the west, but from Byzantium, where Christianity had a distinctive, non-western form and spirit; and a fifteenth-century western attempt to impose western Christianity on Russia had been a failure. In the year 1439, at an ecclesiastical council held at Florence, representatives of the Eastern Orthodox Church in what then - still remained of the Byzantine Empire had unwillingly recognised the ecclesiastical supremacy of the Roman See in the hope that, in return, the western world would save Constantinople from conquest by the Turks. The Metropolitan Archbishop of Moscow, who was a suiffragan of the Greek Patriarch of Constantinople, had been attending the council, and he had voted the same way as his brethren who were representing the Greek Orthodox Church; but, when he came home to Moscow, his recognition of the Pope's supremacy was repudiated there and he himself was deposed.

Learning Western 'Know-how'

Two hundred and fifty years later, when Peter the Great went to the west to learn the 'know-how' of western technology, there was no longer any question of Russia's being required to adopt a western form of Christianity as the price of being initiated into the secrets of western technological efficiency. Before the end of the seventeenth

century there had been a revulsion in the west, not merely against religious fanaticism, but against religion, itself, in consequence of the west's weariness of its own domestic wars of religion. The western world, whose apprentice Russia became in Peter's day, was thus an irreligious world, and the sophisticated minority of Russians who became the agents of the westernisation of Russia followed the example of their sophisticated western contemporaries by turning lukewarm towards the Russian form of Christianity without adopting any western form of Christianity instead. So, you see, in adopting Communism in 1917, Russia was making a breach with her traditions by taking up a western creed for the first time in her history.

You will also have taken the point that this western creed, which Russia did take up in 1917, was one that was particularly well suited to serve Russia as a western weapon for waging an anti-western spiritual warfare. In the west, where Communism had arisen, this new creed was a heresy. It was a western criticism of the west's failure to live up to her own Christian principles in the economic and social life of this professedly Christian society; and a creed of western origin which was at the same time an indictment of western practice was, of course, just the spiritual weapon that an adversary of the west would like to pick up and turn against its makers. With this western spiritual weapon in her hands, Russia could carry her war with the west into the enemy's country on the spiritual plane. Since Communism had originated as a product of uneasy western consciences, it could appeal to other uneasy western consciences when it was radiated back into the western world by a Russian propaganda. And so now, for the first time in the modern western world's history since the close of the seventeenth century, when the flow of western converts to Islam almost ceased, the west has again found itself threatened with spiritual disintegration from inside, as well as with an assault from outside. In thus threatening to undermine the western civilisation's foundations on the west's own home ground, Communism has already proved itself a more effective anti-western weapon in Russian hands than any material weapon could ever be.

Communism has also served Russia as a weapon for bringing into the Russian camp the Chinese quarter of the human race, as well as other sections of that majority of mankind that is neither Russian nor western. We know that the outcome of the struggle to win the allegiance of these neutrals may be decisive for the outcome of the Russo-western conflict as a whole, because this non-western and non-Russian majority of mankind may prove to hold the casting vote in a competition between Russia and the west for world power. Now Communism can make a twofold appeal to a depressed Asian, African, and Latin-American peasantry when it is the voice of Russia that is commending Communism to them. The Russian spokesman can say to the Asian peasantry first: 'If you follow the Russian example, Communism will give you the strength to stand up against the west, as a Communist Russia can already stand up against the west today'. The second appeal of Communism to the Asian peasantry is Communism's claim that it can, and that private enterprise neither can, nor would if it could, get rid of the extreme inequality between a rich minority and a poverty-stricken majority in Asian countries. Discontented Asians, however, are not the only public for whom Communism has an appeal. Communism also has an appeal for all men, since it can claim to offer mankind the unity which is our only alternative to self-destruction in an atomic age.

We must not underrate the appeal of this Communist propaganda from Russia, either because we feel that we ourselves can see through it, or because we feel that Christianity or democracy or whatever our own ideal may be offers an obviously much more excellent way. Communism can appeal to the poor—and most of the people alive today are very poor peasants on the verge of starvation. It can appeal to non-westerners who have become politically self-conscious and who are burning to throw off the political and economic ascendancy of Western Powers—and this is what all Asian and African nationalists do mind about above all things. It can appeal to intellectuals if it can convince them that it is a programme for world-wide peace and justice. And, most formidable point of all, it can appeal to idealists who want to devote themselves to a great cause. So you will see that, in the encounter between Russia and the west, the spiritual initiative, though not the technological lead, has now passed, at any rate for the moment, from the western to the Russian side. We westerners cannot afford to resign ourselves to this, because this western heresy—Communism— which the Russians have taken up, seems to the great majority of people in the west to be a perverse, misguided, and disastrous doctrine and way of life. A theologian might put it that our great modern western heresiarch, Karl Marx, has made what is a heretic's characteristic intellectual mistake and moral aberration. In putting his finger on one point in orthodox practice in which there has been a crying need for reform, he has lost sight of all other considerations and therefore has produced a remedy that is worse than the disease.

The Russians' recent success in capturing the initiative from us westerners by taking up this western heresy called Communism and radiating it out into the world in a cloud of anti-western poison gas does not, of course, mean that Communism is destined to prevail. Marx's vision seems, in non-Marxian eyes, far too narrow and too badly warped to be likely to prove permanently satisfying to human hearts and minds. AU the same, Communism's success, so far as it has gone, looks like a portent of things to come. What it does tell us is that the present encounter between the world and the west is now moving off the technological plane on to the spiritual plane. Some light on this next chapter of this story, which for us still lies in the future, may be found in the history of the world's earlier encounter with Greece and Rome. But, before looking at that, we have to see how Islam, India, and the Far East have been faring in their present encounters with both the west and Russia.