

**"THE DARK
PEOPLE":
RUSSIA'S CRISIS**

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"The Dark People": Russia's Crisis by Ernest Poole

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ERNEST POOLE

**"THE DARK
PEOPLE":
RUSSIA'S CRISIS**



KATHERINE BRESHKOVSKY OR "BABUSHKA," AS SHE IS CALLED. "LITTLE GRANDMOTHER" OF THE REVOLUTION. SHE SPENT NEARLY 40 YEARS OF HER LIFE IN PRISON OR IN SIBERIA, AND IS THE MOST DEARLY BELOVED OF ALL THE REVOLUTIONISTS

"THE DARK PEOPLE"

RUSSIA'S CRISIS

BY

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ERNEST POOLE

Author of "The Harbor," "His Family,"
"His Second Wife"

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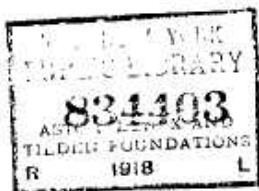
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WINDY WIND
CLEAN
WINDY

INTRODUCTION

I shall never forget the Nevsky, the principal street of Petrograd, as it looked to me in the summer of 1917, in those hot and sultry days and through those long White Nights of the North, when the strange uncertain greyish light slowly deepened into a midnight dusk. A long wide thoroughfare with dirty wooden pavement, in the centre was a double line of overhead trolleys, and on either hand moved dense processions of traffic: military automobiles, motor cycles, ambulance cars and enormous army trucks, countless little open cabs and peasant-carts with huge wooden yokes over the necks of the horses, carts heavy laden with bags of grain, the carcasses of sheep and hogs and many other food supplies. Groups of horsemen passed in the throng, Cossacks with their jaunty caps and curly hair. Occasionally a rich limousine passed, but this was a rare exception. Gone from the streets were the brilliancy and sparkle and pomp of former days.

With a harsh clamour of voices, soldiers and civilians passed: some soldiers neat and orderly and quick to salute the officers; others carelessly tramping along in dirty boots and uniforms, with an air of derisive indifference as the officers passed them

by. Many of these officers had gaunt faces with grim eyes. Others, especially younger men in spruce dashing uniforms, smart capes and glittering decorations, came talking and laughing gaily, lending colour and life to the street. People from all over Russia were here — smart young cadets and students, Cossacks, Georgians, Tartars, gipsy women, Black Sea sailors, Finnish peasants, Little Russians. Groups of wounded soldier boys passed with Red Cross nurses on their way to the movies. There were women beggars with babes in their arms, and there were chattering girls and boys; there were scowling spectacled men who argued intensely as they walked; there were crowds of theatregoers, prostitutes and newsboys; there were endless government employes in uniforms of many kinds. All Russia seemed to be surging by.

There was little or no disorder. As though by some deep instinct, these throngs of people kept the peace. The militia police of the Revolution were a meagre looking force, and one might have expected all kinds of crimes with violence. It was not so. There were immense stores of vodka here, but I saw no drunkenness and you could not buy a drink. The price of fire wood was high and mounting higher every week, but I saw huge piles of paving blocks left all night on lonely streets with no watchman guarding them, and there were no pilferers about. There was disorganization in the whole system of supplies. To buy bread or tea or sugar or shoes,

the people had to stand in long lines. I saw these lines on every hand. Many of them formed at night and stood there until morning. I saw them standing in the rain for hours to get cigarettes. They were always quiet, orderly. They would have long discussions there about freedom, Russia, humanity, God. With that almost tragic patience which seems to be a part of the Slavs, they kept the peace without the law.

And yet there was ceaseless chaos, for behind these stoic faces and beneath these small events of life I could feel the town seething with ideas of war and revolution, change. I saw crowds in front of war bulletins reading of Russian disasters. At midnight they would still be there, with the yellow glare from the newspaper windows striking down on their upturned faces and their anxious gleaming eyes. In one such midnight gathering I met a woman of middle age, who said quietly to my interpreter, "My son is an officer. I have not heard from him in seven weeks. And since then his troops have mutinied."

I felt the constant presence of numberless personal tragedies and of a nation in suspense. War or peace, which should it be? The throngs would eddy here and there around some speaker on the curb and instantly grow all intent, listening absorbedly. Meetings, meetings, meetings — on the streets, in halls and theatres and in stifling little rooms — where by the hour people discussed the problems of

war and revolution: military, political, religious, economic. Delegations from all over Russia kept pouring into Petrograd, still the seat of government and the storm centre of ideas.

At times I felt heavy depression, as though all the sins and weaknesses of the dark despotic past were now weighing Russia down. Again I felt the stimulus of tremendous hopes and visions. But these were turgid and confused; the human sea was turbulent. It has not cleared, nor will it clear till many months and years have passed.

And it was hard to analyse. One must learn about all Russia first. I left the city several times and went to Moscow, smaller towns and lonely little villages. And each time I would come back with a better understanding of these deep surging forces. It is of such vital urgency that we Americans understand; for even though the Russian army ceases to figure in this war, the new nation or the group of nations that will presently arise from these hundred and eighty million people will deeply affect the future in Europe and throughout the world. I can make no definite prophecies, for the situation keeps changing — it is changing while I write. I can give only glimpses, the vivid impressions that I had of the main elements in it all — the forces, problems, hopes and dreams, all interbound and interacting.

I shall take them one by one — the many clashing factions that made up the so-called "government," and after that the army, the railroads and the indus-