

Steering the Ship of State in Russia

by Michael Curtis



Tsar Nicholas II

One of the best known moments in the great Greek mythological legends is the story of the decision by the Greek hero Odysseus on how to sail his ship safely without considerable loss of life between two hazards, the equally dangerous sea monsters Scylla and Charybdis threatening all who seek to pass. Today, Russian President Vladimir Putin is in a similar, if not exactly perilous situation, navigating between two political hazards, a choice between a rock and a hard place, in deciding how to commemorate the Russian revolutions of 1917. What is to be celebrated, fervor for revolutionary change or stability? The decision of the choice, important for both internal and external reasons, is important within the

country but also for those trying to understand Russia today.

President Putin has proudly asserted that “we are a single people, a united people, we have only one Russia.” The problem is that not everyone in the population agrees with this view. The disagreement was symbolized at an art exhibition in St. Petersburg in November 2016 when a picture was shown with a dual canvas, Tsar Nicholas II on one side and Vladimir Lenin on the other side, the old and the new.

The issue has again come to the fore with the controversy over the showing of a film that was cleared for public exhibition by the Russian culture minister. The film, *Matilda*, directed by Alexei Uchitel, is the story of a passionate love affair between the last Tsar Nicholas II and a ballet dancer named Matilda Kshesinskaya, the half Polish teenage ballerina at the Marinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, a lady who was also the mistress of three Grand Dukes.

Banning of the film was suggested by conservative and religious critics, especially the Christian State-Holy Rus because it would offend the feelings of religious believers. Insults of this kind were made a criminal offence in 2013. Russia’s largest cinema chain has decided not to show the film for fear of attacks on cinema goers. President Vladimir Putin, however, has said that no official is trying to ban the movie. On the contrary he called for dialogue about it, though a dialogue conducted within the framework of decency and within the law. He is political president, but he is also the defender of traditional Orthodox Christian values.

The problem is compounded by two facts. One is that Tsar Nicholas, who was murdered with his family in July 1918, was canonized by the Orthodox Church in 2000. The other is that favorable sentiments towards the old Tsarist regime have been increasing. Monuments to the Tsar have been going up. On the 99th anniversary of the murder of the Tsar and his family, thousands of pilgrims, carrying icons, crosses, and portraits

of Nicholas, walked 13 miles to the place of execution near Ekaterinburg. Lenin did not organize the executions but approved them after they occurred.

Somewhat surprisingly to outsiders, a certain number of Russians favor the restoration of monarchy. A special school, named St Basil the Great school, has been established in a Moscow suburb, to teach Tsarist history.

This is interesting not only in itself, but also because it was founded by Konstantin Malofeyev, a multimillionaire, an "Orthodox oligarch" who is close to the Kremlin, and Putin's associates, and sometimes called "Putin's Soros." He funded the rebels in East Ukraine, has an Orthodox TV channel, and asserts he is preparing a "new elite." His own office in Moscow contains Orthodox icons and a large portrait of Tsar Alexander III, a fierce opponent of representative government, and supporter of Russian nationalism and of Orthodoxy. Malofeyev's St. Basil the Great Foundation is Russia's largest Orthodox charity, and his aim is to restore Orthodoxy not only in Russia, but in the world. Equally, he has pointed out that seven of the ten wealthiest countries in the world are monarchies.

Malofeyev is supported by like minded individuals. Probably the most significant are Leonid Peshetnikov and Vladimir Yakunin.

Peshetnikov is an ex General of the KGB and SVR, and head of the foreign intelligence service, the Institute of Strategic Studies, and now head of a group in Moscow called Double-headed Eagle Society. He is anti-American, asserts that it was the US not Stalin who was responsible for the Iron Curtain, and that a strong Russia is a guarantor of justice. In unusual fashion, he compares the two countries. In the Russian civilization, unlike the American, the spiritual has always predominated over the material.

Yakunin, head of Russian Railways until recently and close

friend of Putin, is a significant figure in the Orthodox fraternity, as well as a believer in the return of the Russian Empire.

More significant is Malofeyev's fulsome praise of Putin: "who would have guessed that Putin would come to us and Russia would start becoming Russia again?" Other praise is more surprising. In the US, every child up to age 70 has seen the film *Lord of the Rings* based on J.R. Tolkien's trilogy which though a fantasy adventure tale has affected modern culture. Interestingly, Malofeyev says he is influenced by it, perhaps by the spectacle of unequivocal protagonists preparing for One Ring to rule the Other Rings of Power.

Putin has been careful in not adhering to a particular position, not lauding the Tsarist and not endorsing the Soviet Union. Like choosing between Scylla and Charybdis, his choice is whether the Bolshevik Revolution was a great historic event or a tragedy for Russia. For him indeed, the memories and echoes of the revolutionary years remain. Perhaps Putin does not travel by subway but stations in Moscow's metro system are named after October, and after Pyotr Voikov who arranged the execution of the Tsar. Putin must ponder his path now that in a recent survey of the population a majority of respondents had a favorable view of Lenin.