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THREE
RUSSIAN
PROPHETS

KHOMIAKOV

DOSTOEVSKY

SOLOVIEV



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the last Rome. This conviction was born in their minds in the fifteenth century, a period which was a turning point in the history both of East and West alike.

The collapse of Constantinople in 1453 was for Orthodox Christians a blow as bitter as the fall of Rome in the fifth century had been for Western Christians. The Church and the Empire were believed to be both sustained by God and equally indispensable for the orderly life and salvation of Christians. When the news spread that the Emperor and the Patriarch had perished in the defence of their great city, there was all over the East a widespread fear that the end of the world was nigh. But the years went by and some other explanation of the catastrophe was called for and found, in the theory that the Empire had not been destroyed;

its centre was simply transferred to the north, to distant and hitherto undistinguished Moscow.

The marriage, in 1478, of Ivan III, Grand Prince of Moscow, to Sophia Palaiologos, the niece of the last Byzantine Emperor, Constantine XIII, Ivan's repudiation in 1480 of the Tatar yoke, and assumption of the title of Tsar, or Autocrat, with the double-headed eagle as his device, combined to suggest the revival of the Empire in the north.

The Russians attached supreme importance to the preservation of a link of succession from Constantinople to Moscow, for it brought their new capital under the Biblical promises and blessings.

Justification for belief in the special calling of Moscow was sought in the Book of the prophet Daniel (ix, 27-28, vi, 1-6, ix, 1-27), which described kingdoms as raised to pre-eminence and cast down one after another by the same Divine power. The commonly accepted interpretation of the prophecies was assumed that the two most decisive events of world history, the Fall and the Second Coming of the Messiah, would both take place during the ascendancy of the fourth great Empire, that of Rome. Rome was therefore truly an eternal city, but this did not mean that the power belonging to her was confined to a single spot. The Incarnation incorporated all nations of the world into the New Covenant, and made both Church and Empire truly universal.

Thus the sacred centre of Christendom could be removed from Rome to Constantinople, when the former city succumbed to pride, and thence it was now transferred once more, this time to the north, to Moscow.

Such an interpretation of history linked Russia with the ancient centres of Babylon, Persia, Alexandria, Rome and Constantinople. It demanded the destiny of the young nation with the aspirations

ness of Christian dominion. It made the Tsar of Moscow no mere local ruler, but an œcumenical sovereign, the protector of all true Christians. These prophecies seemed to summon the Russian nation to the building of a great empire, and the liberation of the oppressed Orthodox of the East.

In the first part of the nineteenth century, an elder of one of the monasteries in Pskov, a monk called Philotheam, formulated the widely held conviction. He wrote to the Moscow Prince: "The Church of old Russia fell far as before; the gates of the second Rome, Constantinople, were broken down by the arms of the infidel Turks; but the Church of Moscow, the Church of the new Rome, shines brighter than the sun in the whole universe. Russia, then, grows Prince, that all the nations which hold fast to the Orthodox Christian faith are now gathered together in thy kingdom."

Thou art the one universal Sovereign of all Christian folk; these divisions hold the world in awe of God, but thou who hast commanded them to thee. Two Roms are fallen, but the third stands fast; a fourth shall never be. Thy Christian kingdom shall not be given to another.

In these words, a Russian scholar of the nineteenth century prophetically defined his nation's place among other nations, and outlined an interpretation of those millennium visions which had suddenly transformed his beloved country into a great Empire. The Russians experienced in those decisive years a genuine sense of resurrection. After a long period of suffering and despair, they were brought to freedom and power.

They came back to life, but the world which met them was very different from that which they had left over hundred years before. Gone were the friendly relations with their western neighbours, the trade with foreign countries, the self-governing and progressive cities, and, above all, the great Byzantine Empire.

Russia stood now alone in a hostile world, surrounded by Western heretics, and infidel Mohammedans, with no other friend or protector but Almighty God, who had raised her from death, and revealed to her her new and awe-inspiring mission to be the guardian of Orthodox faith and worship till His Second Coming.

A number of books, partly historical, partly legendary, were produced at that time explaining in learned and simple the connection between the ancient Empire of the East and the young Tsardom of Moscow. One of the most popular stories related here the legend of Michael the Brave was discovered under the name of Basilides and ultimately brought to Constantinople. Eventually