An Island in the Russian Sea:

A Clash of Cultures

By GERHARD WIENS

In early childhood, sometime after I had discovered the difference between sweet and sour, but long before I knew the meaning of north and south, plus and minus, I grew aware of another set of antonyms—German and Russian. To my American readers German and Russian may be just two of a hundred languages, but to me they were opposites, clear antonyms as obvious as black and white. We are now witnessing a division of the world into East and West, but I grew up in a world divided between Germans and Russians. The world consisted of one little island and a vast sea, a German island in a Russian sea. I lived on the island.

This island was about a hundred years old. Early in the nineteenth century, Mennonites from the region of Danzig and Marienburg had come to the vast steppes north of the Crimea, had carved out an oval forty miles long and twenty-five wide and settled sixty villages there. It was a German island in a Russian sea of grass—Russian villages were around it, but not one inside it. In fact, not a Russian house was inside it—Russians were not allowed to settle there. The island was determined to remain an island, and the determination to keep out the sea was sanctioned by imperial edict. We were only a religious sect, but we felt ourselves a people. Racially we were largely Dutch and partly Frisian and German, (our ancestors had fled from Holland to Prussia during the Reformation) but though we spoke German, lived like Germans, and even called ourselves Germans, we knew in our hearts that we were not Germans, but Mennonites. Centuries of persecution had welded us together, had led us to seek our strength within ourselves. We did not want to go out and mingle with the world, and we did not want the world to come in and mingle with us. And if for our forefathers in Germany this attitude had perhaps been a prized luxury, for us in Russia it became a vital necessity. The clash of cultures here was such that we could not mingle and survive as ourselves. Yet a refusal to mingle was bound to lead to ever growing animosity between us and our Russian government. This was our dilemma: Mingle and be lost! Don't mingle and be damned!

At first our problem was relatively simple of solution: we and the Russians could go our separate ways and ignore each other. But when economic and social intercourse became a necessity, we had to decide how far to yield. We yielded little. We were stubborn Dutchmen. We only raised and strengthened our dikes.

We began to dislike the sea around us. If we had ever ventured out upon it we might have come to understand and respect it. And we might have discovered that the sea looked better a few miles out. The inhabitants of "New Russia," that region north of the Black Sea conquered by Catherine from the Turks toward the end of the 18th century, are neither typical Russians nor typical Ukrainians. The pioneer nature of these settlements produced a strain in which the better qualities of both the Russians and the Ukrainians were often weakened. These were our neighbors and these became the laborers on our farms and the maids in our kitchens. We judged all the Russians by them and our judgment was severely negative. Indeed, our ignorance of the Russian people was abysmal. Few of us ever left our cozy little island, and all Russians to us were simply our Mishkas, Vaskas, and Petrushkas, our Mashas and Katyas. And since we were prosperous and they were poor, since we were the masters, they the servants, our feeling of superiority was further intensified by the notion, occasionally found elsewhere in the world, that money and position make one a better man. We were ready and willing to see all the bad in them and all the good in us.

We were, indeed, two very different peoples. And although a philosopher may see the common humanity in every man and even if we all glibly repeat that "people are pretty much alike everywhere," it is a familiar human weakness to see only the differences and to shun assimilation. My people were no better and—perhaps a little worse than average in this respect. And so there were two kinds of humanity, we and they, and we were mostly plus and they were mostly minus. Here are some of the contrasts, partly real, partly imaginary, and all exaggerated: good—and bad; smart—and dull; industrious—and lazy; efficient—inefficient; reliable—unreliable; modern—old-fashioned; morally strict—morally lax; clean—filthy; free of lice—full of lice; orderly—disorderly; sober—drunk; respectful of property—thieving; proud—humble; precise—vague; punctual — unpunctual; ambitious — happy-go-lucky; "Das geht doch nicht!"—"Nichevo!" ("What does it matter?").

It does not follow that we disliked each other generally and consistently. On the whole, we were willing to tolerate each other. Indeed we were quite fond of some Russians—somewhat in the same way that a Southerner may be fond of a Negro, a Negro who knows his place. Indeed, the parallelism between our situation and the American problem is striking. For example, we would not live in the same room with a Russian, or eat together, if we could avoid it. We worked together, but never played with each other. Intermarriage was the horror of horrors, and a stray sheep was summarily dismissed from the flock.

Characteristically, just as America has adopted the music of the Negro, so we eagerly learned the incomparable songs of the Russian people. Being German, we were no mean musicians ourselves, but our singing paled before the outpourings of our

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Gerhard Wiens, Associate Professor of Modern Languages, was born at Lindenau, a village in the Ukraine not far from Dnepropetrovsk. He came to Canada when he was nineteen and to the United States three years later. His education was received at Bluffton College and Ohio State University. He is the author of Bilderlesebuck für Anfänger (1940, *second edition,* 1948) *and of articles published in scholarly journals. "An Island in a Russia Sea" was written for the Quarterly.*