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A Sino-Russian Entente

Charles J. McCarthy, S.J.

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Review Article

A Sino-Russian Entente

IT seems clear that in world Communism today an ideological split and a struggle for power exist between Party leaders in Moscow and Peking. How real and deep the rift is, and what its political, economic and military consequences will be, are questions which engage the interest of everyone.

If in 1968 this Sino-Soviet rift were patched up, and a peace pact valid for the next 150 years were forged in good part through the instrumentality of Jesuit priests, observers would react with astonishment unbounded.

There is no likelihood of such an event five years hence. But in 1689 two Jesuits, Fathers Thomas Pereira and Francis Gerbillon, contributed substantially to the successful conclusion of the first international treaty between great Powers of Asia and Europe to be based on principles of equality and reciprocity. The Treaty of Nerchinsk terminated chronic, sanguinary clashes between China and Russia; enduringly it delineated hundreds of miles of disputed border.

Father Joseph Sebes, S.J., former missionary in China and now a professor in Georgetown University, offers us a careful account of the antecedents of the treaty, its negotiations and its results.¹ Other scholars will be indebted to him for making

¹ *The Jesuits and the Sino-Russian Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689); the Diary of Thomas Pereira, S.J.* Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 1961. xxxvi, 341p. This work was originally submitted as a doctoral dissertation to the Harvard-Yenching Institute, Harvard University.

available new source material on the subject, namely, the complete text and English translation of a lengthy first-hand report by Father Pereira on how and why the treaty came into being, transcribed from the Jesuit archives in Rome.

Nerchinsk was an outpost at the confluence of the Nercha and Shilka rivers in sparsely settled Siberia. The area even now is comparatively little known to the world at large. Yet the reader of this book will find that, in 1689, he stands at the confluence of a surprising number of important currents which have come far across time and space from East and West.

China's ancient concern for suzerainty over her borderlands and her fear of invasion from the north were manifest. Russia's rapid expansion eastward in hungry quest of furs, then "gold of Siberia" (a government monopoly and a major source of state revenue), as well as her hopes of tapping new wealth in trading for China's silks and precious stones were involved. A precarious balance of power was held by the poor but potentially menacing Mongol tribes which bridged China and Russia, and were bullied or wooed to seek protection from one or other of these two giants confronting each other uneasily as antagonists of strength largely unknown. International law was taking shape, and the Peace of Westphalia had set a pattern for future treaties. The Catholic Church fostered her intense, abiding hope for the conversion of China, even though her missionaries took divergent views about methods of conversion. In northern Europe and Peking a strong desire was voiced to break Portugal's power of screening mission personnel and shaping their policies. The Jesuit Order, especially, cherished a dream of establishing communication lines across Russian territory, and an overland route from Europe to China.

The reader will likewise remark that in many respects the psychology and tactics of Chinese and Russian negotiators, though superficially more sophisticated today, still comes close to the 1689 pattern. Saber-rattling, literally, and "shows-of-force" seemed to fill the periods between sessions of envoys. Diplomats today and commentators on the news could learn much of value from this book.

The negotiations were interrupted four times and on one occasion war was practically declared (p. 108). The Russian Governor sent presents to our ambassadors... some coarse meat in great quantities and sweet cookies. As they were unaware of the trust due in international law, our ambassadors were afraid that these things were poisoned... To instruct them I tasted these things without fear, an action which to them appeared foolishly daring; and one of them expressed his thought, 'Father, do they never poison people?' (p. 219).

Inexperienced, they calculated on ten days to the conclusion of the treaty... There began long and useless disputations on past offenses... Each party proposed difficulties and the other gave evasive answers without opening a path to better understanding... The local Governor, a Moscovite and extremely selfish adventurer, who saw that his district was being diminished, persuaded the ambassador not to concede anything, but to fish around a little, as they say, to see whether he could catch anything... It was clear to me that the Moscovite desired the peace and was only trying to get what he wanted by a policy of delay. (pp. 241 sq).

I added that this was an important affair which could not be brought to an end with a hasty resolution; but with perseverance everything would be accomplished. His Excellency should be patient, because it was more important to go home with the peace treaty concluded than to avoid suffering a little from the cold weather which was approaching; also that one should always keep his eyes on the principal things... (p. 249).

The reason for the delay of the Moscovite answer was a difference of opinion among them and the fact that his advisers had persuaded the ambassador to deny everything to see what we would do—a great mistake when negotiating with a nation one does not know (p. 255).

I told them, 'Sirs, only by trusting them can we believe that their agreement is authentic; and we may not jeopardize everything by denying them the confidence due even to a barbarian, which is a category that does not include the Moscovites. Indeed, if the devil himself in human disguise would try to lie and mislead us, he could not do it with such perfidy as we suspect from the Moscovites (p. 259).

Philippine readers will probably find the mission aspect of the story most interesting. In 1493, for early help to missions, Portugal was granted *Padroado* (patronage) rights, and from 1520 she claimed that these were valid with reference to China. "Lisbon had become the gateway to the Far East, and the King of Portugal held the key to all worldly and religious power in these territories... As her military power declined,

Portugal became increasingly jealous of her religious prerogatives." However gifted and zealous they were as individuals, Spanish missionaries were excluded; the French were generally unwelcome. Mission adaptation and breadth of vision could be harmfully restrained under such an arrangement if those enjoying visa-control were narrow or over-cautious in their concept of Christianity.

Natural hazards to navigation, and the fierce intolerance of Islam, constituted other road-blocks to would-be apostles from Europe. Of the six hundred Jesuits detailed for China prior to 1680, only about a hundred had reached the country; "all the rest had either been destroyed by shipwreck, illness, murder, or captured by pirates or other robbers."

Daring exploratory expeditions and persistent diplomatic enterprise towards finding and opening up a safe, free, and time-saving overland route to China for European missionaries bear witness to the high priority this project had at Jesuit headquarters in Peking and Rome. Fathers Matthew Ricci, Adam Schall, and especially the astute Ferdinand Verbiest, from 1666 Jesuit Superior in China, took part in these efforts. Four successive Generals of the Order desired and worked for the same end. Emperor Leopold I in Vienna, Louis XIV in France, John Sobieski, king of Poland, and Pope Clement X gave the plan their positive support. Of possible routes the trans-Siberian seemed alone feasible, and its opening seemed near when in 1684 the Jesuits were allowed to found a residence for religious work in Moscow.

Jesuit priests had been teachers of the Chinese Emperor, K'ang Hsi, and then as personal advisers enjoyed his confidence. By a public and official edict he appointed Fathers Pereira and Gerbillon, with the honors and distinctions of grandees, to the embassy he dispatched to Nerchinsk for a border settlement and an enduring peace.

He meant them, it seems, to be his personal representatives at the negotiations, to ensure that his intentions would be carried out by the official envoys. Their *de facto* functions were more related to true diplomacy than to simple interpret-

ing. Beyond language translation, they had to bridge the wide psychological gaps between the two embassies. Their main contribution to the peace was to protect their party from its own suspicious and centuries-old prejudices. "From time immemorial China had never received foreigners in its Empire except as bearers of tribute and of the political submission it signified. The Manchus (in power only since 1644) considered other nations to be nomad shepherds like their neighbors. They thought that everything belonged to China, which they proudly called *T'ien-hsia* (under heaven), as if nothing else existed." China had not hitherto sent envoys outside its borders to make any treaty. K'ang Hsi's envoys were men of dignity, intelligent and honest, but were not versed in "the ways of the world" as Western statesmen would understand them.

The Jesuits' knowledge of Chinese geography proved of importance at one juncture, at least. K'ang Hsi relied on them to see that the formalities in the writing, signing, sealing and exchanging of the treaty, and in setting sanctions for violations of it, were such as would, according to the law of Nations, bind the Russians to its terms as strictly as possible.

To the Jesuits their chance to render these services seemed likewise an opportunity to improve Sino-Russian trade routes, and to gain good will in Moscow for messengers of the Gospel anxious to use them. Through patience, competence, and devoted efforts they contributed substantially to the reaching of agreement and the signing of the treaty. Father Pereira's report chronicles this fact in lively detail.

Afterwards, the Emperor K'ang Hsi showed his pleasure and gratitude for the Fathers' work. "I know how much you have worked in my behalf endeavoring to please me; I know that it was through your ability and efforts that this peace, in which you exhausted your energies, was concluded" (p. 299). Not content with words, the Emperor in 1692 rewarded the Jesuits for their services by promulgating an unprecedented edict of toleration for Christianity in China, long desired and hoped for. This was the peak moment of their influence. Within ten years the Papal Legate, Charles de Tournon, brought

the unhappy Rites Controversy to a head in Peking, and Christianity fell into strong disfavor, and persecution, at the Court.

"Chinese interests were safeguarded for the 150 years this treaty remained in force," Fr. Sebes writes. "Only after the disappearance of Jesuit influence, with their geographical knowledge, did Russia succeed in incorporating the Trans-Amur territories (an area almost as large as France and Germany combined) through the treaty of Aigun in 1858" (p. 78). After its cession, China came to realize how wasteful of economic wealth and strategic position it had been.

In view later Russian successes, some Russian historians consider the treaty of Nerchinsk a diplomatic defeat for their country, and try to find the reason for it in malicious Jesuit influence and intrigue. At the time and place of the treaty, however, the Russian plenipotentiary, Golovin, thanked the Jesuits for their services and promised his intervention in their behalf before the Tsar. Pereira could write:

The Moscovite ambassador invited me and my companion to his tent. We went at once and were received with charity and courtesy; he chatted with us about many things of the past. During the conversation I begged his pardon for having shown, in certain instances, an irritation that might have seemed an improper behavior in his presence. I said that since I was among foreigners and had lived many years in China, and since I had been sent by its Emperor, I had to show myself as his true subject, and that my not doing so could have had grave consequences.

He, prudent man that he was, answered smilingly: 'In this way you showed what you are; had you acted differently you would have shown yourself to be what you ought not to be. You eat the bread of China, you wear her clothes; consequently you must also become a new man, acting accordingly, and if you do, you show yourself to be genuine. All in all, we know very well how much we owe you and how much you helped us for the common good. I want you to know that I am aware of your help and I reassure you that in a short time, you shall with equal recompense know the results of your work in Moscovy.' He showed himself grateful, and since his thanks did not concern only me personally, I do not consider it a waste of time to indicate the overflowing gratitude of my heart. May the mercy of God grant that he keep his promise and we see the Roman faith rise to new heights in that great Empire (p. 291).

Before Golovin's report to Peter the Great reached Moscow, the Tsar had closed the Jesuit residence in that city. When, after some time, Pereira heard this news, he lamented: "How little we must trust the Moscovites in the future, who for our good services repay us with insults." It is ironic that his "good service" had chiefly been to convince the Chinese legates to put faith in the word of the Russians. The overland mission-route proved to be as alluring, yes, but as heart-breaking also, as the Northwest Passage from Atlantic to Pacific did in America in the 18th century.

CHARLES J. McCARTHY