

ARTICLES

I. History

Social and Historical Preconditions of the Russian Revolutions in 1917. Through the Eyes of the Czech Politician Karel Kramář

Kirill Shevchenko / e-mail: shevchenkok@hotmail.com
Russian State Social University, Branch in Minsk, Republic of Belarus.

Shevchenko, K. (2017). Social and Historical Preconditions of the Russian Revolutions in 1917. Through the Eyes of the Czech Politician Karel Kramář. Czech-Polish Historical and Pedagogical Journal, 9/2, 3–8.
doi: 10.5817/cphpj-2017-008

The article focuses on the important social and historical preconditions of the Russian Revolution in 1917 as perceived by Karel Kramář, famous Czech Politician and the first Prime-Minister of Czechoslovak republic. In his opinion, Russian revolutions resulted from social peculiarities of Russia's historical evolution, from numerous flaws in Russian business culture, state system and government and inability of Russian political elites to meet political and economic challenges. Expressed almost one hundred years ago, Kramář's ideas about social and historical roots of the Russian revolutionary upheavals represent a valuable expert's view from the outside. Now, in the year of centenary of the Russian revolutions, when Historians in Russia and other post-Soviet states continue to discuss prerequisites for those revolutions, thoughts by Czech politician seem to be of particular interest.

Key words: work culture; business qualities; social and historical preconditions; Russia; Revolutions; Karel Kramář

The centenary of the Russian revolutionary upheavals in 1917 has raised the interest of the academic community to their causes and preconditions. The views of the famous Czech Politician Karel Kramář, a contemporary of Russian revolutions and recognized expert in Russian affairs, on that issue can shed additional light on the origins of the Russian crisis one hundred years ago and can be a valuable contribution to better understanding the causes of Russian revolutions in 1917.

Karel Kramář was one of the leading and most popular Czech politicians in late 19 – early 20 centuries. For many years he was the

deputy of the Austrian Reichsrat and the Czech parliament (sněm) and subsequently became the first Prime-Minister of independent Czechoslovakia right after the First World War in November 1918. During the First World War Kramář was imprisoned by Austrian authorities as dangerous Pan-Slavist, Russophile and state traitor and was sentenced to death. Considering this circumstance, his extraordinary and quick transformation from the political prisoner into prime-minister of a new independent state represented a fabulous and unique political career.

Kramář was regarded as one of the staunchest supporters of Slavic reciprocity and close cooperation of Austrian Slavs with Russia, which was manifested in his long-term efforts to develop so-called Neo-Slavism movement in early 20th century. Based on political loyalty towards Austro-Hungary and other existing states and political borders in Europe before the First World War, Neo-Slavism movement tried to raise the Slavic cooperation to a higher level mostly in economics and culture avoiding sensitive and potentially dangerous political issues. One of the key goals of Neo-Slavism was the rapprochement between Austro-Hungary and Russia, which, in Kramář's opinion, was desirable for Czechs and other Austrian Slavs since it could potentially strengthen the political role of Slavs in Austria and reduce Vienna's increasing dependence on Berlin on the international arena. Russian-Polish reconciliation, in Kramář's view, was an important precondition for the successful development of relations between Russia and Austrian Slavs. However, his attempts to develop inter-Slavonic cooperation failed after the annexation of Bosnia by Austro-Hungary in 1908, which sharply spoiled the Russian-Austrian relations and dramatically complicated the international situation and the development of ties between Russia and Austrian Slavs.

In 1890 Karel Kramář visited Russia for the first time and spent there about six months, visiting not only Russian capitals and big cities but also countryside. During his first trip to Russia Kramář attended St. Petersburg, Moscow, Volga region, the Caucasus, and Crimea. Later after his marriage with a rich Russian lady Nadezhda Abrikosova (Khludova), representative of a prosperous merchant family in Moscow, he often visited Russia and travelled a lot both in Russian capitals and in provinces. The personality of his spouse Nadezhda Abrikosova had a strong impact on his general perception of Russia and Russian national character. Overall, the image of Russia was closely associated by Kramář with the image of his spouse.¹ During his numerous trips to Russia

¹ Serapionova, E. P. (2006). *Karel Kramář i Rossija. 1890–1937 gody*. Moskva: Nauka, p. 44.

Kramář maintained quite close personal contacts with various Russian politicians, scientists and public figures and as a result, he gained quite extensive and profound experience of social conditions and real life both in Russian capitals and in provinces. Due to all those factors, Kramář was fairly considered a recognized and well-informed expert on Russia.

Kramář perceived Russian revolutions as a regrettable tragedy in the first place for the Russians themselves and as a very important lesson to learn. It seems to be of particular interest that in his book on Russian revolution written in early 1920-ties, which was translated into Russian and became popular among sizeable Russian émigré community in Europe, Kramář characterized himself as a person who “was always guided by love for the unfortunate Russian people”.² In his opinion, “it would be a terrible injustice if all but the Russians studied at the Russian catastrophe”.³ Information about the course of events in Russia during February and October revolutions in 1917 was received by Kramář from numerous, well-informed and quite reliable but not always impartial sources, mostly Russian eyewitnesses who later emigrated to Europe. Also, in 1919 during Russian Civil War Kramář made a trip to Southern Russia and visited Commander of the Russian White Army General A. Denikin. This trip allowed him to get personal impressions about the situation in this part of Russia during the Civil War.

Therefore, Kramář's views on social and political peculiarities of Russia, on different Russian estates and their work culture and business qualities as important social and historical preconditions of Russia's revolutions in 1917 are of particular value and interest. In Kramář's opinion, peculiarities of Russia's social and historical development resulted in numerous shortcomings of the business qualities of different Russian estates and various flaws in Russian political system and government. This dramatic interaction of different factors led to a chronic lack of organic unity of the Russian people and Russian society, which subsequently played a negative, even fatal role in the development of the Russian empire and triggered the devastating Russian revolutions.

Assessing the most numerous class in Russia, the Russian peasantry, Kramář with his profound knowledge of the Russian village noticed that Russian peasant was often distinguished by general inactivity and carelessness. In his opinion, those negative qualities resulted from prolonged serfdom and social institute of mutual responsibility characteristic of the Russian peasant community for centuries. In

² Kramář, K. (1925). *Russkij krizis*. Pervod s češského A. S. Izgoeva. Praga-Paríž, p. 10.

³ Ibidem.

Kramář's opinion, serfdom, preservation of peasant community after the peasant reform in 1861, as well as the Institute of communal mutual responsibility in the Russian countryside proved to be extremely harmful and counter-productive Russian institutions, which hampered progress and initiative of the Russian peasantry and seriously undermined his loyalty to the state.⁴

On the whole, Kramář was quite critical about what he perceived as extensive ways of farming typical of the Russian village. In particular, Czech politician was surprised by the fact that Russian peasants almost did not use mineral fertilizers and various technical innovations which were common at that time in the Czech village.⁵ Kramář pointed out that Russian peasant often did not quite understand that making more investments in land and in modern agricultural equipment and technologies will give him more revenue.⁶ Therefore, Kramář always supported plans of experience exchange between Russian peasants and more developed peasants from Western Slavic lands. Thus, in May 1908 during his negotiations in St. Petersburg concerning concrete forms of Slavonic cooperation Kramář supported the idea to send a group of Russian peasants to Western Slavic lands to learn more advanced agricultural technologies in order to raise the level of agriculture in Russia.

At the same time, Kramář was no less critical of the Russian nobility, gentry and especially intelligentsia. Thus, Kramář blamed Russian nobility and gentry for their rigidity, inability to consistent work, laziness and stagnation. In his words, Russian gentry lacked initiative and any entrepreneurial skills and qualities and continued to rely on extensive ways of farming and serf labor while European industry and agriculture moved to intensive ways of labor.⁷ On the one hand, Kramář was positively impressed by the fact that Russian gentry was mostly well-educated and knew literature, music and art very well, but on the other hand, in his opinion, culture of the Russian gentry was rather superficial, lacked any practical aspects and generally did not have any positive educational impact on Russian peasantry, which had far-reaching negative consequences.

Criticism of gentry by Kramář was closely associated with his criticism of the Russian intelligentsia. During his first trip to Russia in 1890 Kramář

⁴ Ibidem, p. 18.

⁵ Serapionova, E. P. (2006). *Karel Kramář i Rossija. 1890–1937 gody*. Moskva: Nauka, p. 36.

⁶ Kramář, K. (1925). *Russkij krizis*. Pervod s češšskogo A. S. Izgoeva. Praga–Pariž, p. 14.

⁷ Ibidem, pp. 20–21.

was struck by what he perceived as an extreme radicalism and anti-state sentiments of the Russian liberal intelligentsia. Later Kramář recalled that he was shocked by the words of one Russian liberal intelligent who said that he considered the Russian state an open enemy. Kramář even noticed that Czechs were more loyal towards Austrian state, which was alien to them, than Russians towards their own state. Kramář was also very critical about what he described as excessive cosmopolitanism of Russian liberal intelligentsia. Sharing his impressions about Russian intelligentsia, he emphasized that liberal Russians had very little nationalism and a lot of cosmopolitanism. The fact that Kramář expressed an idea that Russian intelligentsia should first become nationalists in order to become true Slavs was pointless.⁸ It seems interesting that Kramář's criticism of the Russian intelligentsia is in many aspects similar to views of the famous Russian writer A.P. Chekhov.

In order to understand the reasons for that state of affairs, Kramář tended to explain such peculiarities of the Russian intelligentsia by the short-sighted and selfish policy of the Russian autocracy. Specifically, Kramář criticized Russian imperial authorities for excessively tight and repressive policy in education, media and self-government, for the lack of democratic freedoms and general unwillingness to support and promote civil institutions. For instance, he indicated that during the Russian-Turkish war in 1877–1878 Russia, having suffered huge losses, liberated Bulgaria from the Turkish yoke and provided Bulgarians with quite progressive Tyrnovo Constitution while Russian intelligentsia at the same time continued to be deprived of very basic civil rights and continued to dream about Constitution. This circumstance, in the words of Kramář, was true Russian tragedy.⁹ Such policy of the Russian government, in the view of Czech politician, alienated Russian intelligentsia from the government, strengthened ongoing enmity between the state and intelligentsia and, in the end, created preconditions for revolutions.

Finally, Kramář was extremely critical about such form of the Russian political system and government as an autocracy. In his opinion, traditional Russian autocracy was justified and necessary in the early stages of the development of the Russian state when Muscovite Russia had to fight against the Tatar yoke for freedom and independence. However, after the overthrow of the Tatar yoke Russian autocracy quickly fulfilled its historical mission and gradually turned into an obvious

⁸ Kramář, K. (1927). *V zaštitu slavjanskoj politiki*. Praga–Pariž, p. 16.

⁹ Kramář, K. (1925). *Russkij krizis*. Pervod s češšského A. S. Izgoeva. Praga–Pariž, p. 155.

anachronism that hampered progress and could not provide necessary conditions for successful modernization. As the Czech politician remarked wittily, Russia borrowed from the West all the technical innovations, including railroads, telephones and rapid artillery, except for the model of social organization that guaranteed a certain level of stability in Europe. The excessively tight policy of tsarist bureaucracy and its chronic inability to meet the challenges including constitutional reforms and the peasant question alienated intelligentsia and other social groups including peasantry. In Kramář's view, due to short-sighted and often erroneous policy of the Russian elite, Russia could not pass such extremely important exams as catastrophic war with Japan, the First Russian revolution in 1905 and the First World War, which, in turn, finally discredited the ruling elite and paved the way to Russian revolutions in 1917 and subsequent tragic upheavals.

Also, Kramář was no less critical of the Russian liberal politicians from the Provisional government, which came to power after February revolution in 1917, the overthrow of the monarchy and the abdication of Nicholas II from the throne. New political leaders of democratic Russia, in his opinion, lacked practical managerial skills and had no idea of what kind of freedom was necessary for Russia at that time.¹⁰ As a result, their policy after February revolution continued to destroy the state apparatus and intensified economic crisis, chaos and anarchy in the conditions of the ongoing First World War. Kramář stressed that it would be unfair to blame only Bolsheviks and October revolution for the collapse of Russia.¹¹

Kramář also expressed very critical comments on the Russian workers, their work qualities and their behavior during and after the February revolution. In particular, he pointed out the low cultural level and insufficient labor productivity of the Russian proletariat in comparison with Western Europe, indicating that a considerable part of the workers succumbed to the revolutionary propaganda of Bolsheviks.¹²

In conclusion, it is worth of noting that thoughts and ideas similar to those expressed by Kramář almost 100 years ago are being raised and discussed now by many contemporary Russian Historians and Social Scientists, who argue that Russian revolutions in 1917 seemed to be rather logic consequences of the whole previous historical and social evolution of Russia.

¹⁰ Ibidem, pp. 33–34.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 380.

¹² Ibidem, p. 256.