

# CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Joseph Conrad

## Under Western Eyes

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Although less famous than *The Heart of Darkness* (1899), which took its permanent place in academic curricula worldwide because it addressed the unspeakable crimes of colonial history, Joseph Conrad's no less canonical novel *Under Western Eyes* (1911) similarly proves relevant for contemporary European as well as global political and ideological constellations. This political novel, which focuses on selected revolutionary circles at the turn of the 20th century, is notable for its perspectivisation of startling Western views on the Russian state, culture and political traditions, as well as Russia's self-perception as mirrored by the West.

In Part One, the reader is introduced to the events following the Russian Revolution of 1905 through a story about a personal record of Kirylo Sidorovitch Razumov. The narrator, himself "an Englishman", is an English teacher and friend of the Haldin family, more specifically the mother Mrs. Haldin and the daughter Miss Haldin (Natalia Victorovna). Mother and daughter Haldin are staying in Switzerland while and after their son and brother Victor Victorovitch Haldin, a student at St. Petersburg University and a member of a "terrorist" (61) i.e. revolutionary organisation, carries out the "weary work" (63) of removing a prominent Russian statesman (a certain Mr. de P—). Shortly after the assassination, but before he is sentenced to death by hanging and executed, Victor Haldin visits Razumov. They know each other superficially, from university, but share neither interests (revolutionary in Haldin's case and reformist in Razumov's) nor political rigour (Haldin is much more insightful and radical, while Razumov is primarily idealistic and otherwise self-serving). In contrast to Haldin, Razumov – a figure guided by reason rather than passions (his surname suggests a descendant of Reason, russ. разум / rázum) – prefers to look for ways of securing his financial existence. Nevertheless, Haldin asks Razumov to look for a man named Ziemianitch who could organise his escape from the country. After Haldin's visit, Razumov suddenly finds himself "shut up in a fortress, worried, badgered, perhaps ill-used" (62). In a country, the narrator explains, where "an opinion may be a legal crime visited by death or sometimes by a fate worse than mere death" (51), the very fact of knowing a suspect even superficially means risking persecution. The narrator's focus throughout the novel is on the character of Razumov, which makes *Under Western Eyes* not only a political document of a post-revolutionary era but also a character study. During these events and haunted by Haldin's unfortunate visitation, which for him has changed the course of everything, Razumov is repeatedly seized by "a tumult of thoughts" (65). He cannot refuse Haldin, so he sets out to find Ziemianitch (whose name, possibly russ. Земля / zemlya or pol. ziemia – land, earth, suggests a counterpart to Razumov's 'reason'). When he finally finds him in a drunken stupor, Razumov is seized by an uncontrollable rage at the gap between his own national ideals and the brutal reality of this "proper Russian man – the little pig" (for "Who could bear life in our land without the bottle?", comments a minor character, 68). Here Razumov is confronted with the real gulf that exists not only between ideals and reality, the city and the immense countryside, but also between "the people" (70) and himself, or what is already his former self – "the enthusiast" (70). Razumov brutally beats up Ziemianitch, destroying any hope for Haldin to escape the death sentence.

Although it is far from clear what a Westerner would or could have done in a predicament such as

Razumov's momentary quandary between the radicalism of revolution and the cruelty of despotism, Razumov chooses the latter – he betrays Haldin. Before he sets out to present himself at the General Secretariat (i.e. the police), he writes a note attesting to his political rectitude and loyalty to the regime: "He wrote five lines one under the other. History not Theory. Patriotism not Internationalism. Evolution not Revolution. Direction not Destruction. Unity not Disruption." (95) When the police find this document during a regular (and therefore expected) house raid, it confirms Razumov's lack of complicity with the crime. Hereafter, he voluntarily puts himself at the service of the political police, takes advantage of the trust placed in him by Haldin's family and fellow revolutionaries, and interferes in the circles of Russian exiles in Switzerland. This shift from hoping to become a patriotic yet enlightened servant of an admittedly despotic state (hoping to reform it from within) to a spy serving that state's most horrific ends, represents a crisis for Razumov that would be almost "unthinkable" – in the narrator's eyes – if "any young Englishman" (65) found himself in a similar situation:

In Russia, the land of spectral ideas and disembodied aspirations, many brave minds have turned away at last from the vain and endless conflict to the one great historical fact of the land. They turned to autocracy for the peace of their patriotic conscience as a weary unbeliever, touched by grace, turns to the faith of his fathers for the blessing of spiritual rest. Like other Russians before him, Razumov, in conflict with himself, felt the touch of grace upon his forehead. (72)

The story that unfolds hereafter, centring on Razumov's sojourn among Russian revolutionaries in Switzerland, is an emblematic account of what the narrator calls "things Russian" (324; see Yang) – linking "the spirit of Russia" with the "spirit of cynicism" (96). This national spirit is diametrically opposed to revolutionary fanaticism, evident not only in his words but even in the materiality of the revolutionary's handwriting, which (in Haldin's case) "seemed cabalistic, incomprehensible to the experience of Western Europe" (144). Finally, Razumov's cynicism is intriguingly reflected in the narrator's own attitude, so that one cannot help but echo Robert Secor's observation that "the professor Razumov seeks to become [...] what the narrator already is" (Secor 30).

Conrad's narrator – and Conrad is known for his "profound alienation toward Russia" (Melnick 231; see Zabierowski and Kowal) and especially anti-Dostoevsky stance (Under Western Eyes has been repeatedly recognised as an antidote to Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, 1866) – operates consistently but ironically using monolithic categories such as national characters (primarily Russians, English, French and Germans), the European 'East' and 'West', and also 'women' and 'Jews' (who are associated with the conspiratorial agency of the liberal press and revolutionary circles). When the first-person narrative occasionally switches subjects and the narrative voice is given to Razumov himself, whose reflections unveil aloofness from any sort of heightened emotional investment in contemporary Russia (both revolutionary fanaticism and despair), the narrative tone develops into cynicism. Similarly, critical remarks about the Russian Church – which in Mrs. Haldin's words "is so identified with oppression, that it seems almost necessary when one wishes to be free in this life, to give up all hope of a future existence" (122) – also serve to contrast the 'Russian East' and the 'European West'.

Throughout the rest of the novel (Parts Two to Four), the narrator continues to draw on Razumov's diary, insisting that he has received the story – through the diary as well as through direct acquaintances and personal involvement – as "a mute witness of things Russian" (324). This is how the "Eastern logic" unrolls under his "Western eyes" (324). Since this Eastern logic is inevitably interwoven with "savage autocracy" (271) and "un-European despotism" (280), it leads to the thankless dilemma between deliberate servitude and fanatical negation. The nature of this dilemma, the irresolvable opposition of its poles, is repeatedly described as perfectly non-European. After noting early on in his narrative "that this is not a story of the West of Europe" (65), the narrator goes

on to say that “[t]o us Europeans of the West” (127), Russian logic is simply insoluble and opaque: “I suppose one must be a Russian to understand Russian simplicity, a terrible corroding simplicity in which mystic phrases clothe a naïve and hopeless cynicism.” (123) In the West – that is, “at our end of Europe” (167) (Conrad’s English and Polish investments in this ‘West’ are plain to see) – the typically Russian “tones of cynicism and cruelty, of moral negation, and even of moral distress” are “already silenced” (167). In this vein, the narrator, observing a random Swiss couple, remarks that their fate is “made secure from the cradle to the grave by the perfected mechanism of democratic institutions in a republic that could almost be held in the palm of one’s hand.” (175)

Today it is worth rereading this novel, not only because the Soviet Revolution of 1917 gave a new, different meaning to the word ‘revolution’ than it had after the ‘failure’ of 1905, and not only because today it is worth revisiting the literary politics of the Cold War, thanks to which the novel was banned in socialist Poland because of its unflattering portrayal of the aforementioned “things Russian”. After the 1974 Polish edition, which appeared without the preface, the preface was published in 1986 in the underground magazine *Przegląd Polityczny* (Political Review). Before that, the preface was also published in the underground edition of the samizdat publishing house *Krąg* (Circle) in Warsaw in 1981.

What makes it attractive for today’s readers is, in particular, the direct confrontation between the despotic and the liberal regulatory frameworks, in which the political novel of the 20th century was embedded. Despite the historical nuances and systemic differences, it is not only despotism that is of interest here, but also – this is Conrad’s irony and perspectivism at its best – the insight into the systemic (literary) apoliticism, moreover, cynicism of democratic societies that can be taken from the novel. In such a reading, both Razumov, the narrator (“an Englishman” 166) and the author Conrad himself (who continuously strove to free himself from the status of a Russian subject, finally becoming a naturalised British citizen in 1886) take centre stage in a critical reading of this political character study.

*Under Western Eyes* is thus not only a political novel dealing with the social upheavals following the events of 1905, and of value not only to those interested in the revolutionary chapters of the short 20th century; it also recommends itself as a case study of the possibilities of individual agency in despotic and autocratic regimes, which again seems to be an important foil against which the political novel in the 21st century will differentiate itself.

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