Introduction

As will quickly become evident, the origins of this book lie in my experience of the American politics of recent years, both national and university. As I lived through the decade between 1964 and 1974 and at the same time tried to teach American students about nineteenth-century Russian radicalism, I became more and more confused by and dissatisfied with the secondary literature that I was reading myself and giving to my students. Taking full account of the enormous differences between Russian and American historical development, I couldn't but feel that there were strong historical parallels between Russia in the late 1850s and 1860s (when the revolutionary movement began) and my own historical time. Were we going to have an American radical Populism? The beginnings of an American revolutionary movement? For a time it seemed possible. In any case, a sense of the relatedness of the historical periods had been forced upon me, and I now looked at that stretch of Russian history very differently from the way I had approached it as a student in the 1950s —when "revolution" was sinister, out-of-date, romantic: something seen through the wrong end of a telescope. In the late 1960s, I wanted to bring my contemporary experience to bear on the Russian radicalism I was teaching and studying, but I wanted to avoid the pitfalls of easy and anachronistic analogy. This enterprise seemed to me a great challenge. Even before I was conscious of what I was working on, a book on "the radicalization of Russian society" (as I now thought of it) began to take shape in

my mind. I wanted to write about how socialism ceased to be something that intellectuals talked about in salons and became a social movement.

No treatment of the period 1855–70 satisfied me. As far as most Soviet historical literature was concerned, I was bothered by what I took to be a vulgar Marxist stress on the relationship between the economic substructure of society and its intellectual and cultural developments. That is to say, as I watched the radicalization of American society—in particular of American youth—and then its deradicalization, I became aware of how unrelated to major structural economic developments the entire process was. No doubt the affluence, the security, the loneliness of American liberal capitalism was in some way the "bottom line," but that capitalism did not have to encounter major structural "contradictions" for there to be major political and cultural disorder. I therefore began to wonder about the relations between economic development and cultural crisis in my period; I became suspicious of the stress laid by Soviet historians (without much evidence) on the "breakdown" of feudalism—reflected, above all, in the Emancipation of the serfs—and the ceremonial entry of capitalism onto the historical stage as an "explanation" of what is generally referred to as the "revolutionary situation" of 1859–61.

Again, Soviet and some other Marxist historians tend to regard the ideas of prominent radicals like Alexander Herzen and Nikolai Chernyshevsky as in the last analysis a "reflection" of the historical situation of the Russian peasantry and its alleged attempt to liberate itself from serfdom and exploitation more generally.[1] As I watched the American Left struggle to develop a coherent view of itself and of the outside world, I was struck by how closed the process was in a way, how unrelated to what American working people believed they wanted. This radicalization seemed to be an affair of the intelligentsia itself, to use the term in the broadest possible way. The views of Tom Hayden did not strike me as a "reflection" of the views of any segment of the white working class; nor did Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* strike me as a "reflection" of the historical situation of black people,

although the fit here might be a little closer. And here again I focused these impressions on the radicalization of Russian intellectuals a century before.

I had many similar thoughts about American youth culture and the student movement in the late 1960s. How powerful it was, what messianic feelings it engendered, and yet how insubstantial it was! I began to think about the relationship of a vanguard minority to broader strata of opinion in a new way. I became conscious of the importance of radical iconography, style, and vocabulary, and of the confused yet hopeful way that people invest their inchoate aspirations in a set of "ideas" and in a movement. Nikolai Dobroliubov certainly cannot be described by any such imprecise cliché as "the Bob Dylan of his time," but in class I was often tempted to do so.

Perhaps most of all, I felt that the secondary literature at my disposal could not give my students the sense of historical relatedness to the period that I was discovering and wanted to convey to them. Novels like Turgenev's *Fathers and Children* helped, of course. But the real sense of the period that I wanted for them was to be had only by immersion in the memoir literature of the period, most of which was inaccessible to my students because most of it was untranslated. Even so distinguished and politically engaged a monument of historical scholarship as Franco Venturi's *Roots of Revolution* often seemed remote, even dry, to my students, and this despite its powerful and detailed rendering of the heroism of many of the radicals about whom he wrote. At times, even I felt that Venturi, in his zeal not to diminish his subjects, accepted their own vision of themselves and their struggle more than was warranted. Somehow he also imposed on them a kind of uniform heroism that sometimes had the effect of creating a socialist pantheon and populating it with marble busts. To make what appears to be a rather harsh criticism is in no way to deny the fact that I and all my contemporaries are deeply in debt to Venturi's book. With enormous erudition and skill he has mapped the terrain of Populism, and all scholars of my generation will be guided and influenced by his work.

Partially in reaction to the difficulties of teaching Venturi's

book to my students, I have tried to give a more experiential dimension to my account of Russian radicals, to give my version of what things felt like. I fully recognize the subjectivity of such an attempt. What it *really* felt like to be radicalized in the University of St. Petersburg in the late 1850s is out of the reach of the historian. My version is grounded in what is at best a tantalizingly similar situation that took place—or continues to take place—a hundred years later in a very different culture.

To some readers, this book may seem in various ways reactionary—because it stresses the relatedness of radical and reactionary ideas, because I psychologize about ideas and why people hold them (rather than judging those ideas in some straightforward way on their merits as I perceive them), and because there is so much emphasis on the politics of style and fashion. I am in fact concerned that my own experience of student politics in the United States may have induced in me a certain pessimism and cynicism that will show up in this book in the form of "seeing through" the libertarian aspirations of Russian radicals. The Russian radicalism of that time *did* have a greatness and a heroism about it. Franco Venturi may have given it an element of hagiographic uniformity; Soviet historians constantly stress that heroism but feel constrained to remind the reader very often that the Populists did not "understand" the dialectic, the historical mission of the proletariat, and so on.

I am under no such constraints; indeed, outside the Soviet Union even Marxists seem no longer to believe that the proletariat, whatever that term may mean at present, has any historical mission. People choose their own missions, for one reason or another; the Russian intelligentsia, with enormous passion and persistence, chose for its mission the liberation of Russia.

Central to that mission, we can now see, was a revolt against that state power which played so disproportionate a role in Russian development. Both the Slavophiles and the Populists, and the whole circle of those who were touched by their ideas, saw the real values of Russia and Russian creativity not in the state or the forces that had disciplined and unified the country from above, but in society, in "the people." Still, the countervailing

tradition was very powerful: in Russia you get things done from the top, by force. And within that radicalism whose wellsprings were so anarchist, there quickly developed more statist, centralist, power-centered currents. And gradually the statist tradition reasserted itself; the power of centralism became manifest. Populism and anarchism, Russians came to understand, were utopian. My book is also about a stage in *that* development.

Finally, I live in a time and in a place in which it is impossible not to regard the Russian Revolution as having failed in very basic ways. The private feelings of Soviet historians are no doubt various and complicated, but their published work must contribute to the celebration of that Revolution. Almost all Western European and American observers agree, however, that whatever the successes of Soviet power, the Russian Revolution has not realized the hopes of the nineteenth-century Left (including those centering on the problem of alienation) and do not seem likely to do so any time soon. With every year that passes, it becomes more difficult to regard the state that issued from the Revolution as even ambiguously "progressive," as that term used to be employed. This perspective, and the inevitable ironies that accompany it, are built into this book. Our unwelcome knowledge forces on us certain ironic attitudes toward the generous utopianism of Russian intellectuals then. There are other perspectives for students of these events, and there will be more; perhaps if they are unencumbered with "Western" liberal irony, they will better succeed in rendering the nobility and courage of the Populists.

It seems to me better to be explicit about my viewpoint. I want to derive what insights I can from it and explore it as far as I can. But the ambiguities of my attitude have certainly not diminished my admiration for the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia. Those Russian intellectuals remain, for me, about the most remarkable, many-sided, and congenial people whom I have heard or read about. Their story is still, for me, an inspirational story.

In conclusion, I should like to thank the American Philosophical Society, the Howard Foundation, the Russian Research Cen-

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Russian Society on the Eve of Emancipation

History generally, and the history of revolutions in particular, is always richer in content, more varied and more many-sided, more lively and "subtle" than the best parties and the most class-conscious vanguards of the most advanced classes imagine.

—Vladimir Il'ich Lenin, *Left Communism*

Alexander Herzen wrote in 1851 that the history of Russia since the reforms of Peter the Great was by and large "the history of the Russian government and the Russian nobility."[1] Although rhetorically phrased, Herzen's words contain a good deal of truth: "history" was still being made, in mid-nineteenth-century Russia, by a tiny group of people. All aspects of culture and politics were conditioned by the enormous gap between the two cultures of Russia: that of *obshchestvo,* or "society," and that of the *narod,* the people or peasantry.

What does the term *obshchestvo* mean?[2] How it was used may tell us something about the social realities of Russia in the 1850s. Although the term always had strong aristocratic connotations, it does not refer to old Muscovite society but, in its origins, to the service gentry that was created by the reforms of Peter the Great. One aspect of its meaning was close to what the French meant by *le monde* or the English by "society" in the sense of "high society." But virtually until 1917, *obshchestvo* had another

meaning—or, more properly, another sense or emphasis—for which there was no analogue in nineteenth-century France or England. The term was often employed to indicate those active in the life of the nation: men of affairs, artists, thinkers, and even rebels—provided they were not *peasant* rebels like Emel'ian Pugachëv, whose massive revolt shook the empire in the early 1770s. Thus, in a sense, there was a meritocratic element in *obshchestvo* membership, which reminds one that Peter the Great attempted, albeit not very successfully, to ensure that membership in the gentry was open to commoners of great ability. More central to the significance of *obshchestvo* is the fact that until very nearly the end of Imperial Russia a small social elite was simply assumed to be the source of all high culture, the agent of the government, the representative of the nation. The people whom one might "meet" or "receive" were the only people who did important things. Such an equation had existed in most European societies, but only in Russia did it survive unchallenged into the second half of the nineteenth century. And only in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Russia was the culture of society assumed to be non-native, that is, "Western."

After 1860, a less class-bound term, *obshchestvennost'*, began to be used to describe the active, civic, culture-bearing element of the population. *Obshchestvennost'* coexisted with *obshchestvo* and gradually replaced it, a change that reflected the steady fragmentation of the Russian elite, the fading of aristocratic values, the increasing disjunction between birth and talent. Crucial to this process was the rise of the liberal professions and the economic decline of the Russian gentry after the Emancipation of the serfs in 1861. Alexander Herzen was born in 1812 and died in 1870; radicals of his generation were all members of *obshchestvo;* this generalization cannot be made of the oppositional figures of the next generation.

The world of Russian radicalism into the 1870s was small and closed, and for the historian who has become acclimatized to it, reading a book on French or English radicalism can be something of a shock. Russian radicals, throughout most of the nineteenth century, were largely isolated from the 90-odd percent of

the country that they felt to be their natural constituency: the peasantry.* But in Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down,* for example, the picture of seventeenth-century England that emerges is of a genuine social pyramid, with various layers and strata shading into each other—at any rate, until very near the top. Even in the seventeenth century, English radicalism might become a "popular movement" (for a time, at least) in a way that Russian radicalism did not achieve for well over two hundred years. England was not anything that might be called an "open society" in the modern sense of the term, but the amount and variety of contact and interaction between diverse social elements is—to the student of Russia—extraordinary. In Russia, serfdom and manorial agriculture provided the only real context for relations between the peasantry and *obshchestvo.*

Why this enormous gap (abyss, with its slightly melodramatic connotations, is probably the right word) between the peasants —the *narod*—and the small world of *obshchestvo?* (There were merchants, of course, and a few other odd intermediate groups, but none was either numerically or sociologically significant.) Part of the answer lies in Russia's enormous size, her poverty, and the endless series of foreign wars that attended her unification. Economic "modernization" or development did not come from below, but was sponsored by the crown, in particular during and after the reign of Peter the Great in the first quarter of the eighteenth century. Agriculture and industry developed not on the basis of free labor but through increased socioeconomic exploitation of the peasantry, through serfdom. Russian military advance and economic development increased rather than diminished this abyss between the monarchy and gentry on the one hand, and the *narod* on the other. At the same time, it took on a profound cultural dimension as well. In the course of the eighteenth century, the upper echelons of Russian society be-

*Russia's total population in 1858 was roughly seventy-four million. Jerome Blum estimates that rather more than fifty million people were either serfs or "state peasants." See *Lord and Peasant in Russia from the Ninth to the Nineteenth Centuries* (Princeton, 1961), pp. 476–77. According to the Soviet economist Pëtr Lyashchenko, the Russian population was 94.3 percent rural in 1858 and 5.7 percent urban. All but a smattering of the rural population were peasants of some kind. See *A History of the National Economy in Russia* (New York, 1949), p. 273.

came thoroughly Europeanized—in many cases coming to feel most at home in a European language (French), of which the *narod* could know nothing. To many peasants, their masters were not only their bosses but quite literally foreigners.

This division of Russia into *obshchestvo* and *narod* powerfully shaped the whole of Russian life and culture in the imperial period, and after 1860 it quickly became the major problem for activist Russian radicals. Even those who were problematical members of *obshchestvo* from the point of view of the social elite were, because of their Western culture, indubitably members from the point of view of the *narod,* and they were forced to operate almost wholly within its boundaries. Until the very end of the century, the greatest single problem that confronted Russian radicals was escaping from the charmed circle of *obshchestvo* and finding support in the *narod.*

In seeking to understand the Russian village and its history, Russian radicals turned to songs, tales, legends, and proverbs—which helps to explain their apparently disproportionate interest in ethnography. They studied the songs and tales of the peasantry in search of the imagery of spirituality (if they were Slavophiles) or revolt (if they were of a *narodnik* turn of mind). And later generations of historians have turned to those same texts to try to understand the consciousness of the peasantry—how they thought of the Tsar, for example, or how they experienced the reforms of Peter the Great.

Neither in England nor in France were the laboring classes so culturally remote or sharply demarcated from their social superiors. Nineteenth-century English radicals came from diverse social backgrounds; members of the English laboring classes were frequently found in reforming movements and radical politics. But only a tiny handful of nineteenth-century Russian radicals was from the *narod.* The most that can be said is that individual peasants or workers—and precious few of the latter until the 1890s—or small groups, on occasion, showed a certain interest in radical ideas, particularly if they could be rooted in an actual situation of unusual popular misery and given a traditional-Chris-

"A remarkably fine work which I really enjoyed. In sharp contrast to earlier treatments, Gleason's succeeds in making this aspect of Russian history come to life. He gives the reader a feeling for the social environment in which Russian radicalism developed, and a feeling for the personalities involved. He makes sense of the progression from conservative slavophiles and liberal westernizers to totalitarian radicals—it is not just a series of ideas or viewpoints or groups one after another."

—Walter M. Pintner
Chairman, Committee on Soviet Studies,
Cornell University

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