# FOREWORD

THIS book, intended for the common reader as well as for the student, chronicles the Russian revolutionary tradition. The account covers a little more than a hundred years, from the first serious questionings of the established order to the emergence, toward the close of the past century, of two major rival parties committed to a violent break with the past. It was first in the eighteen-thirties that a few Russian heads were turned by socialist theory, and the present work naturally records its fortunes under three czars. The development of Populism, the native variety of Socialism, is a dominant theme. The mutinies and popular rebellions of earlier times, among them the jacqueries headed by the Cossack firebrands, Stepan Razin and Yemelyan Pugachev, in the reigns of Czar Alexis and Catherine the Great respectively, do not belong to the story.

Of necessity the socio-political setting, changing with the passage of time, has been sketched in. Only thus could the sequence of events, including those of the intellectual order, be intelligible. Cut off by the autocracy from political experience, with no opportunity to subject theory to the harsh test of practice, the radical movement was to a large extent a matter of doctrine and dogma, the product of minds given to pursuing ideas *à outrance*. Hence the close attention to ideological trends and to the men who were responsible for them or gave them currency. Throughout emphasis falls, however, on clandestine activities, whether executed or merely planned, whether they took the form of peaceful propaganda or political assassination.

The men and, from the sixties on, the women, behind these efforts and exploits include a variety of human types. They illustrate what Pascal called 'the glory and the baseness in man,' and, of course, a mixture of the two, as also of insight and dunderheadedness. Along with zealots and triflers, there are a few crackpots and many innocents. And there is the sinister premonitory shadow of a being less than human that lies across these pages. In

the later chapters the centre of the stage is held by idealists, in some cases willing to use any means for the sake of the end, people who have learned to forego pity and are ready to immolate others as well as themselves in the service of what they believe to be just. The tale is a tragic one, though not without moments of comedy.

I would have liked to bring the story down to the epochal turning point of the year 1917. But this would have required another volume. Attention centres here upon early stirrings, initial attempts, and pioneer endeavours. The narrative follows the headwaters of the revolutionary current and comes to a stop just before the rivulets join to form a sizable, if divided, stream. Yet this survey of 'unhappy, far-off things, and battles long ago' is not without relevance to what happened when the old order was finally overthrown, and should help to bring into sharper focus the Soviet phenomenon, if only because of the way it contrasts with all that the nineteenth-century radicalism dreamed of, stood for. The revolution has followed a course unforeseen either by the populists or their Marxist adversaries. Nevertheless there originated within the period examined some of the ways of acting and thinking that persisted into the current century and have influenced Soviet ideology and practice. Such, for example, is the concept of what may be called the telescoped revolution, involving seizure of political power and its dictatorial use to the end of enforcing socialism. Several Soviet historians have emphasized the debt Bolshevism owes to the cohort of populist propagandists and terrorists which went by the name of The People's Will. Indeed, it is doubtful if the doctrine of Leninism can be fully understood without taking account of the indigenous social-revolutionary tradition as it developed in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Over the years, and especially since 1917, the literature on that subject has grown enormously. It is mostly in the nature of monographs and papers on particular episodes and personalities, also of documentary source material, such as police reports, prisoners' depositions, trial records, texts of underground publications issued by the various secret groups and societies. The present study seeks to be a work of synthesis based on much of that literature. Practically all the necessary research was carried out in the New York Public Library, which has an unusually ample Russian collection. Grateful acknowledgment is hereby made

for the friendly services of my former associates in the Slavonic Division of that library. I also wish to thank Boris Ivanovich Nicolaevsky for allowing me to draw, now and then, on his intimate knowledge of the Russian revolutionary movement. The dedication is an inadequate token of my indebtedness to my wife, who gave me every kind of help in the writing of this book.

A word should be said about chronology. Unless marked N.S. (New Style), the dates are according to the calendar which was used in Russia before 1 February, 1918 (Old Style); being of the nineteenth century, they are twelve days earlier than they would be if reckoned by the calendar now in general use. N.S. is omitted where it is clear from the context that the date is reckoned by the latter calendar.

A. Y.

*September*, 1956

# CHAPTER V

## FREEDOM?

THE news of Nicholas's death brought a general sense of relief. All thinking people felt that the event marked the end of an era, and that there were bound to be decisive changes. The long winter had come to an end and the tumult of spring was sweeping through the political air. Tongues were loosened, minds were aroused. 'Whoever was not alive in Russia in 1856,' wrote Tolstoy, 'does not know what life is.'

At first the new Czar, busy bringing the war to an end, could not give thought to the great reforms awaited by the country. He did, however, show a concessive spirit in various small ways. Restrictions on the number of university students were lifted and difficulties in the way of foreign travel removed. Some Decembrists and Petrashevists were amnestied. One or two notorious obscurantists were dismissed from high posts. Each liberal or humane measure, however trivial, was greeted with enthusiasm and served to sustain the great expectations that buoyed up all hearts. Hints at coming reforms were read into official pronouncements. The time for patchwork measures seemed at an end.

The slogan of progress was on every tongue. It was the refrain of the books and periodicals that were appearing in greater numbers. The press was given licence to touch on questions of foreign and domestic policy, although certain topics, notably the abolition of serfdom—the pivotal issue of the day—could not be mentioned. Forbidden subjects were aired in manuscript pamphlets by both Slavophils and Westernists. In their eagerness to work for a regenerated Russia the two camps were ready to bury the hatchet. Not that the Westernists were all of one mind. They had a left wing with its own organ, the Petersburg monthly *Sovremennik* (The Contemporary). The magazine was controlled by Nikolay Nekrasov, a civic poet of great popularity, who was also a shrewd editor. He leaned heavily on a young man by the name of Nikolay Chernyshevsky.

The radicals had a somewhat uncertain ally in the handful of

expatriates captained by Herzen. A few days after the beginning of the new reign he addressed an open letter to the Czar. Acknowledging himself 'an incorrigible socialist' and his addressee 'an autocratic Emperor', he declared that nevertheless the two had in common a love for the Russian people. In the name of this love he urged Alexander II to free the press from censorship, abolish corporal punishment and wipe out the blot of serfdom. He promised 'to wait, obliterate himself, speak of something else', as long as he could hope that the government would accomplish these great things. He did not know how to obliterate himself and he could not speak of other things, but he did observe a kind of private truce with the Czar during the years that preceded emancipation.

The open letter was printed in the first number of a review which Herzen issued from his Free Press in July, 1855, on the anniversary of the execution of the Decembrists. He called it *The Polar Star,* after the miscellany that Ryleyev had once edited, and he provided it with a frontispiece showing the profiles of the five who were hanged. His previous pamphlets lay on the shelves of a shop in Paternoster Row gathering dust. *The Polar Star,* however, found its way into Russia and was eagerly read. It was a year old when Herzen started another publication: *Voices from Russia,* in which he printed some of the political literature that circulated in manuscript.

He soon perceived that there was need of yet another organ which could more readily keep up with the rapid pace of events at home, and which, being less bulky, could be more easily smuggled across the border. Accordingly, on 1 July, 1857, he launched *Kolokol* (*The Bell*), first a monthly, then a bi-weekly. He now had the help of Ogarev, who had joined him in London the previous year. *The Bell* summoned the living—*Vivos Voco* was its motto—to bury the dead past and work for the glorious future. It undertook to be everywhere and always on the side of freedom and against oppression, for reason and against prejudice, for science and against fanaticism, for progressive peoples and against backward governments. Specifically, *The Bell* was devoted to 'the liberation of Russia'.

In addition to being an ideologue and a memoirist of high distinction, Herzen was a crusading journalist possessed of a powerful pen. And he had the inestimable privilege of freedom

from censorship. The office of *The Bell* was flooded with communications from home, and there was a constant stream of Russian visitors of both sexes and all sorts and conditions to the house in Putney where Herzen lived and worked. With their help and that of scores of correspondents scattered through the country, *Kolokol* conducted a most successful muck-raking campaign. It cited particulars and named names. Minutes of the secret sessions of the highest bodies appeared in its columns. Fear of exposure there became a deterrent to administrative abuse. There was talk in high places of buying Herzen off, perhaps with an important post. The journal was read by all literate Russia, from the Emperor down to high school boys. The smuggled sheets were sold almost openly and were transcribed or mimeographed to meet the demand. The handful of London expatriates were a power.

When *The Bell* first began pealing from the shores of the Thames, Russia had known peace for more than a year. As soon as the war was over, the Czar had turned his attention to domestic matters. He was not a reformer either by temperament or conviction, but he was statesman enough to perceive that the Empire could not muddle along in the old way. Naturally, the peasant question was the first to engage him. It was increasingly obvious that the system of serf labour was choking the life of the country, economically and otherwise. Furthermore, the discontent of the masses was mounting. At the height of the war there were peasant riots in several provinces. They were caused by a rumour that the emancipation *ukase* had already been signed but was kept from the people by the officials. According to another rumour, the treaty that terminated the hostilities contained a secret clause which obligated the Czar to free the serfs.

The peace of Paris was signed on 30 March, 1856 (N.S.). Less than a fortnight later the Czar startled a gathering of nobles in Moscow by observing pointedly that while he did not intend to abolish serfdom with a stroke of the pen, the existing order could not be left unchanged, and that in any event it was 'better that bondage should be abolished from above than from below'. Nearly seventy years earlier Radishchev had had an imaginary czar advance this very argument. The serf owners, however, failed to take the hint. A secret commission was set up to study

the problem, but made no headway. Finally, on 20 November, 1857, the Emperor took a long step toward emancipation by authorizing the gentry of three north-western provinces to form committees to discuss the terms of the measure.

This first public move in the direction of the epoch-making reform was greeted with enthusiasm by all the progressive elements. It rejoiced the hearts of Westernists and Slavophils, liberals and radicals. Herzen delivered himself of a pæan to the Czar, saying that he was 'as much an heir of 14 December as of Nicholas'. He declared: 'We go with him who liberates,' adding cautiously: 'and as long as he liberates.' *The Contemporary*, too, called down blessings on the Emperor's head. Momentarily even the most radically-minded entertained the belief that the system could be overhauled under the existing régime painlessly and gradually, yet thoroughly.

II

The state of harmony between the Government and the public was short-lived. The Czar had wanted the initiative in the matter of abolition to come from the serf-owners, and he was willing to have committees of them debate the details of the measure. But he relied on the administration to formulate and carry out the reform and he made it plain that he would brook no nonsense from the gentry. In the autumn of 1859 delegates from a number of provincial committees were summoned to the capital to confer with the officials. They criticized the plans of the administration as both unjust and illegal. One of them wrote to the Emperor urging him to let the nobility have a hand in working out the measure instead of merely offering suggestions. The delegates were rudely reprimanded, and two or three of the bolder spirits, including a former Petrashevist, were deported.

Like the aristocratic *frondeurs* of the previous century, the malcontents among the gentry sought political power as a compensation for the threatened loss of economic privilege. To the Slavophils, wedded as they were to the principle of autocracy, constitutional guarantees limiting the sovereign's authority were anathema. But they allowed themselves to speak out for freedom of conscience and to harp on the necessity of an 'understanding'

between the people and the state. As a result, some of their organs were hounded out of existence.

The deliberations dragged on. Were the freedmen going to be provided with land? How large would the allotments be? Would these be redeemed by the peasants or the Treasury? How onerous would the terms of redemption be? Would the *obshchina* be perpetuated? Would there be a transitional period, and of what duration? Would the landlords retain any of their authority over their former serfs? These momentous questions hung in the balance. They were guardedly debated in the press and were the chief subject of discussion in the publications issued by the London expatriates.

When Herzen had first considered the terms of emancipation, before any steps had been taken toward it, he had argued that in fifty years liberation 'without land' would turn Russia into another, and more wretched, Ireland. And, of course, he pleaded for the preservation of the peasant commune. This was Cinderella's dowry, the only precious possession of a backward, poverty-stricken nation. The salvation of Russia, perhaps of the world, lay in the *obshchina*. For did it not hold the germ of the collectivist society, toward which all mankind was striving? These views determined the position of *The Bell* on the peasant reform. Since what Herzen was to call the *muzhik*'s 'religion of land' had as its cardinal dogma a man's right to the land he tilled, it followed that, if the expectations of the freedmen were to be met, they must be allotted gratis at least the acres they had worked under serfdom for themselves. Naturally the land would be held collectively and redistributed periodically on an equalitarian basis.

Although Herzen lost no opportunity to repeat that he would welcome liberation, whether it came from above or from below, in reality he heavily discounted the latter alternative. At first he expected that the progressive elements of the gentry would exert a decisive influence in shaping the reform. He also conceived the curious notion that the Czar could be persuaded to establish a species of agrarian socialism with a stroke of his pen. Only reluctantly did he accept the principle of redemption, preferring a money settlement to the bloody insurrection that the landowners' resistance to even partial confiscation would provoke.

Whenever the Government seemed to yield to reactionaries

intent on sabotaging the emancipation, he would savagely turn on the Czar. 'We have nothing to expect from the Government,' he declared, when a notorious anti-abolitionist was appointed to head the commission that drafted the emancipation statutes. And he urged boycotting the reform. Nevertheless his confidence in the Emperor's noble intentions persisted. He continued to imagine that 'the imperial dictatorship' could embrace the cause of the masses and overcome the resistance of the propertied classes without danger to itself or a breach of the public peace, and a Romanov become the crowned head of a Socialist state.[1] Lassalle's notion of an alliance between the King of Prussia and the working class comes to mind. For all his dislike of centralized political authority, Herzen's thinking reflected the strong tendency of native scholars to cast the monarchy in the rôle of the protagonist in the drama of Russian history.

Herzen's stand earned him criticism both from the moderates and the extremists. One liberal told him that no educated Russian had any use for his chimerical theories, least of all for 'social democracy'. What the country needed was freedom of the press and a way to liberate the serfs without shattering the whole body politic. And he pleaded with Herzen to stop telling the West that the *muzhik* was destined to bring socialism into the world. The plea went unheeded. In the columns of *The Bell* and elsewhere Herzen continued to harp—in general terms, as usual—upon the promise of 'Communism in bast shoes'. Nor was he any more willing to heed another liberal who reproached him for philippics that only irritated the authorities who were engaged in the delicate task of untying age-old knots. And he continued to reflect on the sad state of the West, what with political rights vanishing in Europe and slavery flourishing in America.

On the other hand, the small contingent of radically-minded intellectuals that sprung up during the first years of the new reign was far from pleased by the course the London émigrés were pursuing. The issue of *The Bell*, dated 1 March, 1860, contained a letter to the editor signed 'A Russian'. It painted a black picture

[1] In 1890 Konstantin Leontyev, a reactionary thinker of some originality, threw out the suggestion that some day a czar might put himself at the head of the socialist movement and organize it, the way Constantine the Great had organized Christianity.

of the way in which the peasant reform was being mishandled. The serfs were exploited more ruthlessly than ever by the masters, who knew that their days of power were numbered. The peasants were desperate and ready to rise. Meanwhile the liberals were babbling of peaceful progress. The writer reproached Herzen for echoing them. 'Our situation is terrible, intolerable', he concluded, 'only the axe can save us, and nothing but the axe! . . . You have done all you could to promote a peaceful solution of the problem. Now change your tune and let your *Bell* not call to prayers, but ring the alarm! Summon Russia to seize the axe! Farewell, and remember that trust in the Czar's good intentions has, for hundreds of years, been ruining Russia. It is not for you to support that faith.'

Herzen's retort, printed with the letter, was that the country really needed not an axe but a broom. In Russia the old order was without any genuine strength, and a painless transition to a better society was quite within the range of possibility. In any event, force was to be appealed to as the last argument. He confessed that since the butchery he had witnessed in Paris in 1848 he had conceived a horror of blood. (Had he forgotten his hosannah to 'chaos and destruction'?) True, the Government was cowardly and the serf owners were holding on to their 'baptized property' with the tenacity of a steppe wolf clutching a bone. Nevertheless, some progress had been made. Besides, there was no unanimity in the ranks of the opposition, and where were the troops of the revolution? It was possible that the people would swing axes without prompting. That would be a great misfortune, he wrote; 'let us do everything in our power to prevent it'. At any rate, he could not issue a call to arms from his safe retreat in London. 'And who, except the Emperor,' he asked, 'had in recent years done anything sensible for the country? Let us render unto Caesar,' he concluded, 'the things that are Caesar's.'

The identity of 'A Russian' has remained undisclosed. It was probably either Nikolay Chernyshevsky, the right hand of the editor of *Sovremennik*, or some member of the group that revolved about that publication, possibly Dobrolubov, one of its contributors. At the beginning of the new reign he had not reached his twentieth birthday, while Chernyshevsky was only half a dozen years older. Both came from ecclesiastical families and had attended divinity school. In fact, the elder of the two

HISTORY

# ROAD TO REVOLUTION

## *A Century of Russian Radicalism*

This book traces the history of revolutionary movements in nineteenth-century Russia, ending with the great famine of 1891–92, by which time Marxism was already in the ascendant. The extraordinary story begins with the publication, in May 1790, of a book by Alexander Radishchev exposing the corruption and cruelty of the regime of the Empress Catherine and suggesting that the nation could well dispense with the throne. Coming as it did immediately after the French Revolution, Radishchev's work caused much anxiety in court circles and set an example for the numerous secret societies that were to emerge in the 1830s and beyond.

Two chapters of the book are devoted to the Decembrists, the first to take up arms against the autocracy in the 1800s. Other chapters describe the "children's crusade" and the manhunt that culminated in the assassination of Alexander II.

"This is an excellent piece of high-level popularization that will bring pleasure and enlightenment to the nonspecialist reader and will no doubt prove a useful addition to the reading in courses on modern Russian history." —MARTIN MALIA, *American Historical Review*

"Taking for his theme a vast and disorderly subject, [the author] has managed to narrate the story of the pre-Marxist Russian revolutionary movement in a simple, lucid and dramatic form. . . . The result is an extremely readable introduction—based on the best available sources and written in a lively and expressive style—of the road that led to the Russian revolution. —JOSEPH FRANK, *The New Republic*

AVRAHM YARMOLINSKY (1890–1975) was Chief of the Slavonic Division of the New York Public Library and the author of numerous works, including *Turgenev: The Man, His Art, and His Age.*

Cover: The scene of the assassination of Alexander II

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