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Richard Wortman

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## I

## THE CITY AND THE COUNTRYSIDE

In the capitals there is noise,  
Orators thunder in the boiling war of words,  
But out there, in the depths of Russia,  
Eternal silence reigns.

NEKRASOV

The Great Reforms of the 1860s struck at the moral foundations of Russian state and society. Alexander II's decision to overhaul the nation's political and social institutions was an implicit acknowledgement of the weakness and injustice of an autocratic order long presented as the embodiment of strength and right. What had been declared sacrosanct during the oppressive reign of Nicholas now appeared fallible. The claims to unquestioning obedience suddenly seemed founded on no more than hollow formulas used to disguise incompetence and abuse. The impulse to reform impeached the principles of legitimacy that had allowed the tsar and his advisers to dominate Russian life and opened the floodgates to the critical tendencies they wished most to avoid.

To be sure the government endeavoured as best it could to carry out the reforms in a conservative spirit and, as has been frequently shown, preserved the old social relationships and the old injustice more than it changed them. It remained averse to adventurous new economic policies that would stimulate social flux, and, as before, stood adamantly opposed to any pretension on the part of society to play a role in the decisions of state. But if the reforms left the objective conditions of Russian life fundamentally unchanged, they shattered the old attitudes of the thinking public. Everything hallowed by tradition now had to be judged anew, in the scathing light of reason and justice. Not only political institutions but the whole complex of established social relationships came into question. The most sensitive and best educated members of society began to re-evaluate their attitudes toward themselves, their families and society at large. They perceived the marks of the old order on everything—the deep scars of suspicion and fear left by the

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dehumanizing tyranny of Nicholas's regime. Once tradition lost its aura of sanctity, the youth began to look upon the ways of the older generation with new eyes. To them, both past and present appeared tainted with injustice. Only the future held out hopes of dignity and virtue.

The time-honoured callings that had been followed by generations of Russian youth took on the stigma of the old regime. Rather than pursue their fathers' livelihood or heed conventional notions about rising in the world, the new generation began to rebel against the patriarchal order that surrounded them. Many refused to devote themselves to serving a system that seemed justified by no higher end than its own survival. Raising their voices in protest and self-affirmation, they assailed the landlords for their parasitism, the church for its ignorance and venality, the bureaucracy for its corruption and indifference to human needs. They created a spirit of criticism and opposition and introduced new and strident notes into the intellectual discourse of the time.

Like no previous generation in Russian history, the generations of the reform era entered maturity with a psychology of change. The unthinking submission to the dictates of tradition gave way to a total rejection of existing reality and of the conventional ethics that governed Russian life. The young intellectuals of the fifties and sixties yearned to transform themselves into new men with personalities suited to the society they envisioned and to purify themselves of the elements of the past they sensed within them. They sought the guidelines of the future in the social doctrines of the West and studied them assiduously for principles and values they could embrace.

The scene of their quest was St Petersburg. Large numbers of the most intense and dedicated youth gathered in the capital as the spirit of free thought spread across the empire. There they took part in a life of reason and intellect far removed from the humdrum world of the provinces. They met in circles to discuss the latest radical theories and the means to realize their ideals. They examined the principles of natural science, psychology, sociology and ethics for their bearing on the destinies of the individual and nation. St Petersburg, the symbol of the autocracy, endeared itself to all those yearning for a more just life. Although they were oppressed by its harsh climate and by the odious presence of the institutions of state,

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they could never stay away for long. Grigorii Eliseev, an influential radical publicist of the sixties and seventies, wrote:

Whatever you may say about Petersburg, in the end one must admit that for the time being it is the only city in Russia similar to a European city. Whoever finds provincial life suffocating 'for various independent reasons' [bureaucratic oppression]; whoever is stirred by vital thought demanding recognition, sympathy, encouragement and help; whoever is so unfortunate as to feel the clash and contradiction between ideal and reality without, however, being able to close his eyes to it; whoever is sickened by a monotonously tranquil and unchanging course of life, with the same unchanging faces, the same morons, boors, dodgers, wise men and jokers, etc.; he will find no harbour anywhere in Russia but Petersburg. Petersburg is the single asylum for all *the toiling and the downtrodden*.<sup>1</sup>

The word 'intelligentsia' originated in Petersburg during the 1860s to designate this group united by a common devotion to enlightenment and the cause of the ideal. It was part of the jargon called into existence by the pronounced neo-Hegelian cast of mind of this and subsequent generations of radical youth. 'Intelligentsia' expressed the faith that reason was unfolding ineluctably in history, leading men to more just social forms, and that the bearers of intellect would be the ones to perceive and promote the more rational and humane noumenal reality. It asserted their claim to supersede traditional authorities, who were wedded to the doomed phenomenal world, in charting Russia's future. Later the meaning of the word would seem ambiguous, and often to obscure the distinction between the educated and the politically advanced. But the generations of the fifties and the sixties knew of no such distinction. For them education was the conveyor of reason and the educated man was one who would inevitably appreciate the irrationality of existing conditions and the need for swift and profound changes.<sup>2</sup>

To take leave of the past, the radical youth had to sever their emotional attachments to class and family. This step liberated them and gave them the opportunity to shape their

<sup>1</sup> G. Eliseev, 'Proizvoditel'nye sily Rossii', *Otechestvennye Zapiski*, no. 176 (February 1868), p. 450.

<sup>2</sup> For a penetrating discussion of the term 'intelligentsia' see Martin Malia, 'What is the Intelligentsia?' in *Daedalus* (summer 1960), pp. 441-58.

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own lives. But, at the same time, it cut them off from the strength of the adult world and deprived them of the confidence and inner certainty afforded by traditional forms of behaviour. They suddenly found themselves with no group to belong to, whose values they could share. The need for a strong class identification, bred in them during their childhood, could not be fulfilled once every class appeared implicated in the sinister dynamic of the social system. The feeling of affection for their parents also became suspect. In a diary entry of 1857, the twenty-one year old Nikolai Dobroliubov, soon to become Russia's foremost radical literary critic, wrote, 'The voice of one's blood ties has become scarcely audible. It is being drowned out by other, higher and more general interests. . . . If intellectual and moral interests diverge, respect and love for one's kin weaken and can, in the end, disappear.'<sup>1</sup> But love for one's kin did not disappear. A conflict raged in the youths between new aspirations and old sympathies, splitting their personalities into irreconcilably warring halves. The father, tainted by his involvement with the old order, could no longer serve as a model of manhood, and the filial love he evoked had to be suppressed at all costs. The theme of fatherlessness runs through the writings of the period, from the novels of Turgenev and Dostoevskii to the memoirs of Dobroliubov, Figner, and Iakubovich, not to mention the works treated in subsequent chapters. In some cases, such as that of Dobroliubov, where the son regarded his father with enmity, the latter became a symbol of the oppressiveness and irrationality of the old order, and childhood rebellion, reinforced with the conviction of social righteousness, was acted out as a bitter and aggressive attack on all founts of authority.<sup>2</sup> Where affectionate relations prevailed between fathers and sons, as was certainly more often the case, the father came to be viewed as an emasculated victim of the old conditions, an object of both pity and embarrassment. In all circumstances the spirit of change eroded the bonds of sympathy and admiration that cement successive generations and left the youth without personal attachments or a heritage that could have meaning for them in their future.

<sup>1</sup> N. A. Dobroliubov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1934-9), vi, 478.

<sup>2</sup> See the interesting if extreme interpretation of F. Weinstein, in *Nihilism and Death: A Study of the Life of N. A. Dobroliubov*, unpublished dissertation (University of California at Berkeley, 1962).

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With the feeling of release, the young members of the intelligentsia experienced a loss of bearings, a confusion about their origins and nature that their enlightened view of the world could do little to alleviate. The writings of the first years of Alexander's reign tell of their futile groping for a new personality consonant with the demands of the new era. The novels of Turgenev described the plight of young nobles, heir to a genteel, effete way of life, who lacked the resolve and determination necessary to act as they longed to. In his critical articles, Dobroliubov, who came from the rural clergy, assailed the flaccid and hypocritical attitudes of the privileged class and called for 'new men', who were endowed with common sense and possessed the 'enterprising, decisive, persistent' character that would enable them to bring their ideas to fruition.<sup>1</sup> Dobroliubov, like many others, expected this type to appear among the *raznochintsy*, those, who like himself, had come from humble backgrounds and had abandoned the fixed callings of the past to participate in the intellectual life of the capital. But the problem of the *raznochintsy* proved no less stark. Lacking the cultural and intellectual breadth of the nobility, they had difficulty finding any qualities at all in themselves that did not derive from their disowned milieu. They had grown up with personalities suited to the stations that awaited them in life, and when they embarked on a totally new path, they felt an uneasy emptiness in themselves, an absence of firm values and emotions of their own. During the first surge of excitement, they revelled in the corporate spirit that reigned among the radical youth of the capital. They joined radical circles, self-help societies, and charitable organizations, and participated in the 'Sunday school' movement to teach workers to read and write. But as these associations dissolved, or lost their efficacy under growing government pressure, they found themselves without a role or purpose amidst a world unknown to them. They passed from one solution to the next, trying to find in each the certainty that would enable them to define their new characters. As each failed, they sank deeper into personal and ideological confusion.

Their dilemma was expressed in the words of Cherevanin, the autobiographical hero of N. S. Pomialovskii's novel *Molotov*. Cherevanin, like Pomialovskii the son of a rural cleric, fore-swore his past and premised the meaning of his life on a successful

<sup>1</sup> Dobroliubov, II, 344–5.

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break from the old ways. Those who remained bound by them, he declared, had no distinct existence of their own. 'Everything they have has been received by inheritance. Their virtues are not their own, their vices are not their own. Even their mind belongs to another. What are you, you honourable man? Where is your individuality, your talent—have you added a *grosh* to it?'<sup>1</sup> But Cherevanin could find nothing to replace his own lost heritage and sensed that his life had become devoid of all meaning and direction.

Where is my childhood? It has become the object of speculation, fantasy, general phrases and blind reminiscence. The whole makeup of body and soul, everything that comprises life, has fallen into oblivion. With time all events have lost the colour of detail and have become deprived of inner meaning. The chain of life has been broken into bits. Its springs and links have fallen apart. How am I to prove that I have even lived?<sup>2</sup>

The lives of the *raznochintsy* of the fifties and sixties bear a dual aspect. In their writings and deportment, there was an air of bluster and confident self-assertiveness characteristic of those defying the niceties of society. But underneath ran an undercurrent of weakness, an uncertainty about the meaning of their lives that in time gave rise to a mounting self-hatred, an urge for self-destruction that drove many of them to seek oblivion in dissipation and drink. The biographies of the leading *raznochintsy* writers of these years, such as Pomialovskii, Reshetnikov, Dobroliubov, Nikolai Uspenskii, are bitter tales of disappointment and anguish, which frequently end with early, self-inflicted death.

Reason alone could not answer the demands of feeling to fill the emotional void left by the broken attachments to family and class. The youth continued to crave a group they could cherish and emulate, an object in Russian life for their powerful but ungratified affections. Turgenev characterized their longing in the words of Elena, the heroine of *On the Eve*. 'How can one live without love?' she exclaimed, disillusioned in her family and friends. 'Yet there is no one to love.' They found this object in the Russian peasantry. They transferred their filial affections to the great masses of the Russian people, who, like themselves, had not been tainted by participation in the old

<sup>1</sup> N. G. Pomialovskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow–Leningrad, 1935), I, 240.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* I, 180.

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order and had suffered as its victims. Elena finally discovered feelings in common with all the poor and suffering in Russia and bestowed her love upon them. The young *intelligenty* in the city, estranged from their homes and early environment, felt a strong bond and sense of identification with the people. They beheld the peasant as an ally, an *alter-ego* whose sentiments were akin to their own. The peasantry became the powerful force through which reason would be realized in Russia and the outmoded social order swept away. The identification with the peasant bolstered their feelings of self-esteem and made possible a meaningful role for them in Russian life. With the peasant as their beloved, they could find something to love in themselves; they united themselves with a source of strength and vitality that could imbue them with new confidence.

The *raznochintsy* in the capital sought spiritual companionship in the peasants and in the lower-class elements of the capital. Pomialovskii would disappear for weeks on end to consort with the poor and degraded who shared his forlorn sense of homelessness.<sup>1</sup> A. S. Reshetnikov, the orphaned son of a poor village deacon and postman, could feel warmth and friendship only toward the peasants, and his love for them sustained him through his brief and unhappy life. His writings are a powerful expression of the attraction that the radical youth of the reform era felt toward the peasantry. Looking into the lives of the most destitute and helpless inhabitants of the countryside, Reshetnikov could respond with sympathy for their plight and understanding of their aspirations, while the ordinary individual remained unmoved.

How many carts passed by them with people in warm furs! Those sitting in the carts not only failed to nod to them but didn't even look their way. They didn't know how much Pila and Sysoiko had endured. They didn't know that their whole life had been only privation, misery and bitter tears; that Pila and Sysoiko couldn't remain in their village; that they were sick of their native region and because of need were leaving to venture into the cold, going somewhere in search of a good place, where life would be better, where there would be plenty of bread and they would be free. . . .<sup>2</sup>

The bond with the peasantry took form as an essential element of radical thought in the years preceding the

<sup>1</sup> Pomialovskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (St Petersburg, 1889), I, p. xlii.

<sup>2</sup> F. M. Reshetnikov, *Sochineniia* (Moscow, 1874), I, 98.

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promulgation of the emancipation. Though the members of the generation of the fifties strove for an objective, scientific view of the world and prided themselves on their ability to confront and acknowledge the unsightly features of Russian life, they soon felt the need for something to idealize and to embrace. Once the gentry and autocracy revealed their determination to pursue narrow class interests, the radical youth began to turn to the peasants as the only group in Russia likely to share their disaffection. They felt akin to the peasants by virtue of a common alienation from the existing order: a common pedigree of suffering more enduring and meaningful than class or blood ties. They believed that the peasants would feel impelled to join the intelligentsia in the transformation of self and society, and their hopes seemed to be borne out by the widespread unrest in the countryside in the years preceding and the months immediately following the emancipation.<sup>1</sup>

The ideological formulation of these attitudes was the work of the mentor of the new generation, a bookish *raznochinets* already entering his thirties, Nikolai Chernyshevskii. Chernyshevskii commanded wide learning and the kind of sharply defined and all-embracing world view that appealed to the youth. His ‘anthropological principle’, which he borrowed from European scientific thought of the time, reduced all human behaviour to simple general laws. The ‘anthropological principle’ denied body–soul duality and held that all men were composed of the same matter and responded in like manner to similar causes. Chernyshevskii could thus show that he and the intelligentsia possessed urges and thoughts in common with humanity in general. To understand the peasant, one had only to understand oneself.

So, I say, if you know [that all men inside are the same], then you don’t have to worry about studying [the people] in order to know what they need and how it is possible to act upon them. Assume that they need what you need and you will not be mistaken. Assume that the same calculations and motivations act upon ordinary individuals among the people that act upon ordinary individuals in your sphere and that will be correct.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Akademia Nauk SSSR. Inst. Istorii. Glavnoe Arkhivnoe Upravlenie. Tsentral’ny Gosudarstvenny Istoricheskii Arkiv SSSR v Leningrade, *Krest’ianskoe dvizhenie v Rossii v 1857–1861 (iun) gg.; dokumenty* (Moscow, 1961), *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> N. G. Chernyshevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1939–53), VII, 864.



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Though most peasants, Chernyshevskii admitted, suffered from the same flaws and weaknesses as civilized men, there were also those who could rise above the ordinary and change the world around them—people ‘of energetic mind and character, capable of thinking over a given situation, understanding a given conjuncture, becoming conscious of [their] needs, considering the means to their satisfaction, and under given circumstances, acting independently’.<sup>1</sup> With the analogical reasoning permitted by the ‘anthropological principle’,<sup>2</sup> Chernyshevskii conjured into existence a group of peasants whose position in the village was equivalent to that of the intelligentsia in educated society—the *intelligent’s* doubles, who cherished his ideals, his realistic outlook and his thirst for action. When conditions ripened, and the masses began to chafe under their burden, these conscious peasants would join the intelligentsia and lead in the destruction of the old order.

But the expectation of change stirred fear as well as hope. If not harnessed to their ideals, change could work to their disadvantage, and destroy the values they cherished and the grounds for a just social order. With their ambitions for the future went deep apprehensions about its true nature. They feared lest history be not the unfolding of justice on earth but the triumph of evil. They knew Russian reality to be inhabited by powerful and malevolent forces that they were unable to cope with. Reared in close familial surroundings, accustomed to the understanding and affection of parents, friends and servants, they had reacted with horror and loathing to their first glimpses of Russian life. The ethos of brute domination that governed the master’s relations to his serfs, the teacher’s to his pupils, the bureaucrat’s to his subordinates, had frightened them. The cruelty, depravity and greed that confronted them everywhere had filled them with revulsion. Many had retreated into their families or into a life of reading and contemplation, but their feelings of fear never left them.

The belief in the peasantry gave them the strength to resist their fear. The peasants became their guardians of virtue and kindness against the evils of the alien civilization they dreaded. The peasants showed that not all mankind had been corrupted. Unspoiled by the vices of civilized life, the peasants, Nikolai Dobroliubov wrote, were still able to hearken to the voice of

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* vii, 887.

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common sense issuing from nature. They maintained their faith in human dignity, while educated society paid respect only to the caprices of etiquette and propriety. 'There [among the peasantry], there is more attentiveness to the worth of the individual man, less indifference to what my neighbour is like, and what I appear like to my neighbour.'<sup>1</sup>

Most of all, the members of the intelligentsia dreaded the prospect of uncontrolled economic change and the behemoth of modern industrialism, which, being unknown and distant, assumed terrible proportions in their imaginations. They feared the chaotic development that they envisioned blighting the West and threatening to engulf Russia. Capitalism embodied for them the callousness and egoism that had appalled them in Russian life, and its spread promised to destroy everything they held dear. Their succour was the peasant land commune, which they hoped would serve as a bulwark, against capitalism. In 1857 Chernyshevskii described the commune as the 'sacred and redeeming heritage bequeathed to us by our past life, the poverty of which is atoned for by this one invaluable heritage'.<sup>2</sup> The communal organization, he showed, ensured land to each member, and kept peasant economic life free from the officious hand of the government. In this way it discouraged the exploitation of the helpless by the rich and powerful and forestalled the growth of a proletariat.<sup>3</sup> It was, in his words, an 'anti-toxin', which was 'extremely effective in preventing those sufferings that we witness in the West'.<sup>4</sup>

Chernyshevskii and his followers, however, were not prone to idealize the commune in its existing state; nor did it figure as the central tenet of their doctrine. Rather, it was one article of faith that made the prevalence of a virtuous peasant society seem conceivable and even probable. They regarded it as an institution that might enable social progress to follow the pattern they envisaged and not that dictated by the vagaries of a free economy. Though imperfect, it furnished a system of relationships that could be developed into a just and rational social organization. In an article of 1857, Chernyshevskii provided ideological substantiation for these hopes. He elaborated the notion, first advanced by Alexander Herzen after the revolution of 1848, that the commune was a possible embryo

<sup>1</sup> Dobroliubov, II, 270, 295-6.<sup>2</sup> Chernyshevskii, IV, 341.<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* V, 615-18.<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* IV, 341.