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THE CRISIS OF RUSSIAN POPULISM

We feared [our father] worse than fire. Just his glance, cold and penetrating, was enough to make us tremble, to fill us with a feeling of moral terror. Any physical punishment from a kinder person would seem easier to bear than the silent retribution of his eyes.

Father was absent frequently and for long periods of time; he would be making his rounds in the state forest. When he was home no one was afraid: he had a rifle in his den and everyone was calm. But when he was away, what could we do? There were only women and children in the house. A dark elemental fear came over all of us, from the smallest to the biggest.

VERA FIGNER

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Aleksandr Engel'gardt
Nikolai Zlatovratskii

Gleb Uspenskii

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BY

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To my parents

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PREFACE

Russian populism has not been slighted by the historian. The tale of the revolutionary events of the 1870s has been told many times, often very well, in scholarly studies. Yet, after reading the literature on the subject, one comes away with a curious sense of dissatisfaction. Most of the authors narrate the familiar sequence of events, and present the familiar cast of characters performing their celebrated exploits. From their treatment, one gains little appreciation of the populists as human beings and little understanding of what impelled them to embark on their seemingly futile course. As a result, populism appears fantastic and unreal, something divorced from Russian life of the time and irrelevant in its context, while the populists themselves wear the guise either of madmen or of gods.

The reason for this is not hard to discern. Since the publication of Sergei Kravchinskii's *Underground Russia* in the 1880s, populism has been surrounded by the aura of myth, while its history has become the preserve of polemicists and *littérateurs*. In the early twentieth century, when historical opinion on the subject took shape, populism was viewed in the light of the turbulent struggle against the autocracy. Representatives of the various Marxist and Social Revolutionary factions tried to place themselves in the mainstream of the revolutionary tradition by discovering in the earlier movement the origins of their own particular point of view. They therefore emphasized such matters dear to their own hearts as political change and revolutionary organization. The historiography of the 1920s continued in this direction and in the thirties Stalin terminated investigation of the subject by denouncing the revolutionaries of the seventies as liberal and bourgeois. As a result, the contemporary student is removed from the events not only by the time that has elapsed but by the highly tendentious nature of most of the secondary materials that treat them.

In recent years populism has become the subject of more serious and critical examination. In the Soviet Union, it has regained its revolutionary mantle and has received increasing attention from scholars. The publication of a collection of documents and the increasingly frequent appearance of sensitive

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studies based on fresh primary research are signs of a renewed scholarly activity which in the future promises to be even more fruitful. In the west, Franco Venturi's *Roots of Revolution* has provided us with a learned survey of the subject that is both exhaustive in its research and perceptive in its analysis. His book gives an invaluable portrayal of the breadth and the complexity of the movement, and it has been indispensable to me in the preparation of the present study.

But these recent works, which focus primarily on the active revolutionary movement, do not consider the problem of the basic nature of the populist ethos. We have learned much about the events, organizations, and participants of the movement, but little about populists themselves. We are presented with the traditional ideological pattern, leading from Herzen and Chernyshevskii through Lavrov, Bakunin, and Tkachev, but we know little about the kind of mentality that these doctrines contributed to or reflected. Few *intelligently* repeated one or another of the points of view; most created their own particular amalgam of ideas and attitudes and did so with an intensity and determination that so far have remained unexplained. We do not know what was primary and what secondary in the populist mentality, what a vital and deep concern and what merely a strategic consideration. As a result, even the basic question of whether there existed anything that we can speak of as a populist mentality has not been adequately answered.

This has been pointed out in an incisive critique by Richard Pipes, published recently in the *Slavic Review*.¹ Professor Pipes shows the limited original usage of the term 'populism' in the latter part of the 1870s. He points out that its common meaning, designating the whole of the movement of the seventies, and for some historians reaching back to the sixties and the fifties, was chiefly the invention of Marxist polemicists of the nineties, who used it to include all those who did not accept their own notions of social development. He thus questions whether the coherence of viewpoint imputed to the pre-Marxist revolutionary movement is not illusory and whether economic and social conceptions usually identified with populism, such as a belief in the peasantry and in the peasant commune, were not merely strategical concomitants of the political struggle, without

¹ Richard Pipes, 'Narodnichestvo: A Semantic Inquiry', *Slavic Review*, vol. xxiii, no. 3 (September 1964), pp. 441–58.

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great importance in themselves. He characterizes populism as 'a political attitude, devoid of specific programmatic content'.

I believe that Professor Pipes has probed the chief weakness in the historiography of the subject, but I suspect that in speculating on alternative answers he has risked even greater misconceptions. For while he has shown that the facile use of the term *narodnichestvo* has obscured meaningful analysis of the main-springs of revolutionary action in the seventies, he has fallen into the opposite fallacy and assumed that because the term was used disingenuously and sloppily, the phenomenon referred to did not exist. I can see few grounds for such a contention. It has become fashionable in the United States and Britain to discount ideology as an effective historical factor, and to stress in its place organizational and practical concerns, perhaps in reaction to earlier approaches that concentrated on intellectual trends to the exclusion of all others. But in the case of the *narodniki* I think there can be little doubt that the attitudes towards the peasantry were central to the radical conception of the world, and that the Marxists were not inventing a fictional opponent but distinguishing themselves from something very real indeed. The mass of articles, memoirs, and *belles-lettres* of the 1870s and early 1880s is powerful evidence to this effect. Scarcely an issue of the major radical journals goes by that is not filled with works on peasant life, most of them written with a passion and intensity that allow no gainsaying of the depth of the authors' convictions. Indeed, to deny the importance of the peasantry and the notion of agrarian socialism for the intelligentsia of the seventies, one would have to dismiss nearly everything written in Russia at the time and most memoirs on the period.

Professor Pipes is correct in pointing out the absence of specific programmatic content in the *narodnik* groups he discusses, and I believe he has done a service in attacking the notion that the intelligentsia of the seventies subscribed to a defined monolithic ideology. But this in no way indicates the absence of a common conception of the world among them. What united the movement was not a particular programme, or particular pronouncements by Herzen or Chernyshevskii, but shared attitudes and preconceptions—hopes, fears, longings, and hatreds that were merely given shape by one or the other ideological formulation. The unity of these decades was less an ideological than a

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psychological unity, a common emotional bond with the rural population that at times grew into an enamourment. Programme and ideology were used as instruments to strengthen and to protect this bond. Politics as an end in itself was unknown, and even as much of a Jacobin as Petr Tkachev invoked it for negative reasons—to forestall the incursion of capitalism and thus safeguard peasant society. The absorption with the peasantry became apparent at the end of the fifties. It persisted into the sixties, and dominated the intelligentsia's psychology during the seventies. The populism of the late seventies represents not merely a particular political strategy, but the culmination of a psychological dynamic at work since the beginning of the reform era. This argument will be elaborated in the first chapter.

The emotional moment of populism becomes most prominent at the time of its crisis, at the close of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties. The disintegration of the populist world view then threatens not only the premises of radical action, but the individual's conception of himself as well. It transpires that populism is not merely a rationale adopted to promote change, but an integral and essential part of the personality of those espousing it. It is in times of crisis that the individual's defences and the mask he presents to society fall away and reveal the vital workings of his psyche, and it is during the crisis of populism that the populist mind discloses itself. Those who underwent personal crises and recorded their painful soul-searchings and inner turmoil have left glimpses into the populist mind that are closed to scholars who limit themselves to programmatic and doctrinal statements or to memoirs written long after. It has been the purpose of this study to examine several of these figures and to add a personal and psychological dimension to the history of populism.

My approach has been to treat my subjects within the context of the period of crisis, focusing on the evolution of their thoughts and feelings. This, of course, has made it impossible to treat other aspects of their work and life. I have therefore concerned myself little with the intrinsic worth of the authors' works, though often the latter can stand on their own merits even apart from their social significance. Engel'gardt's beautiful descriptions of peasant life retained their popularity well into the twentieth century and can be read with pleasure and profit even

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today. Uspenskii, though not ranking among the immortals of nineteenth-century Russian literature, nonetheless is a writer of staggering intensity and power, who is widely read today in the Soviet Union and should be better known in the West. Daniel'son's and Vorontsov's economic theories possess an interest in their own right, as part of the development of economic thought in nineteenth-century Russia. But I have refrained from both extensive literary analysis of Uspenskii and extensive economic analysis of Daniel'son and Vorontsov.

This approach is justified, I think, by the fact that these writers all subordinated their particular endeavour to the more urgent social and personal impulses of the moment, and called agronomy, literature, and economics to the defence of their ideals. Though Vorontsov falls under the category of economist, and Zlatovratskii under the category of writer, Vorontsov disclaimed expertise in economics and Zlatovratskii disavowed literature as art, both dedicating themselves totally to the preservation of the populist ethos. Indeed much that was written by the one could have been written by the other. I have also devoted little attention to the provenance of ideas or to the shape they took before becoming the property of the populists. The ideas of these writers are of little interest in themselves; they are derivative and were usually borrowed whole, uncritically, with little concern for their original content or intent. Their interest lies in the way they expressed the powerful hopes and feelings they were meant to justify.

My approach to the sources has been governed by these considerations. Where the authors revised their works with the aim of making them more polished and consistent, I have turned to the earliest available versions, which display the initial doubts, confusion and vacillations. Thus I have used Vorontsov's and Zlatovratskii's articles in *Otechestvennye Zapiski* (*Annals of the Fatherland*), rather than the former's heavily edited *Sud'by kapitalizma v Rossii* (*The Fates of Capitalism in Russia*) and the latter's book version of *Ustoi* (*The Foundations*). In the case of Uspenskii all the variants are reproduced in the massive *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*.

I would like to convey my appreciation and thanks to all those who have assisted me in the preparation of this book. Leopold Haimson first awakened my interest in populism and has been the ideal mentor, both demanding and generous,

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reading through all the various versions of the work and administering, when necessary, the proper doses of criticism and encouragement. Michael Cherniavsky's excellent comments on the original dissertation suggested new and fruitful paths to follow in the revisions. Michael Confino's astute challenges have been indispensable in working out my own point of view. S. S. Dmitriev, while faithful to a conception of the world and of history utterly different from my own, was an erudite and thoughtful adviser to my researches in the Soviet Union.

I owe an especial debt of gratitude to Eugene Vinogradoff, who read through the manuscript with extraordinary care and precision and offered sensitive and incisive suggestions on every aspect of the substance and writing; his extraordinary sense of style and organization was of immeasurable help to me in judging and revising my work. Other invaluable criticisms were provided by Robert Crummey, Phillip Pomper, and Reginald Zelnik. Mrs Mary Fisch, who typed the manuscript, is deserving of unending praise for her patience, sensitivity to the author's desires, and uncanny ability to read my handwriting.

To my wife Marlene, who in her own gentle way is among the most ruthless of critics, I cannot begin to express my gratitude here. I can only thank her for the long hours she spent reading and re-reading this work from the beginning of the task to the end, and for her unfailing understanding, which, more than anything else, made it possible for this book to be written.

I am most grateful for the grants I have received from the Ford Foundation, the Inter-University Committee on Travel Grants, the Social Science Research Committee, and the College of the University of Chicago. None of the aforementioned institutions is in any way responsible for the views expressed here, which are my own. Whatever shortcomings may be found in the pages of the book are also my own, while for its strengths I am most indebted to those who helped me.

R. W.

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