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Russian intellectual life in the 1840s and 1850s

_Nicolaevan Russia; the growth of Russian literature; Chaadayev’s ‘Philosophical Letter’_

“‘Despotism still exists in Russia: it is the essence of my government, but it accords with the genius of the nation’”, Nicholas I told the French Marquis de Custine, who travelled extensively in Russia in 1839. Custine’s own observations abundantly confirmed the emperor’s judgement. He found a régime under which everyone and everything depended upon the favour of one man. Deprived of liberty, the Russians had developed a ‘taste for servitude’; ‘great and small’ alike were ‘drunk with slavery’. Everywhere the traveller could find ‘compulsory manifestations of submission’; he was among a ‘nation of mutes’, sixty million automata awaiting the ‘wand of another enchanter’ before they could again enjoy life. Existence would become ‘insupportably dull to the individual who should allow himself to reflect’, for to converse was to conspire, to think was to revolt and thought was not merely a crime but also a misfortune. The Russians had pretensions to ‘good manners’ and Western education, to be sure, for they were an ‘imitative people’ with a ‘general passion for novelties’ and were ‘incessantly occupied with the desire of mimicking other nations’, which they did ‘after the true manner of monkeys’. Nevertheless Russia remained ‘more nearly allied to Asia than to Europe’, a ‘monstrous compound of the petty refinements of Byzantium, and the ferocity of the desert horde’. She was a nation of ‘enrolled and drilled Tartars’, ‘a barbarism plastered over, and nothing more’.¹

Custine’s observations on the nature of the Russian régime must have been unexceptionable to its critics. Nicholas was by all accounts every inch a king, but he visualised the state, as one historian has put it, as a ‘well drilled army unit, that is, a polity embodying the principles of hierarchical subordination, close delimitation of the duties of each member, and the unchallengeable
authority of the anointed leader’. His manifesto of July 1826 promised a gradual amelioration of national institutions by reform from above, but in practice his autocratic power was never checked and the bureaucracy by which the Empire was administered remained cumbersome, inefficient, arbitrary and corrupt. Indeed, the means of repression at the disposal of the emperor were significantly strengthened in Nicholas’ reign. The voluminous laws of June 1826 gave wide powers to censors and although in 1828 a more liberal law was devised it was applied in a draconian spirit and stiffened by further provisions after the French ‘revolution’ of July 1830. A special gendarmerie – the notorious Third Section of the emperor’s own Chancery – was set up in June 1826, placed under the control of Count Benkendorf and given responsibility for the detection and punishment of all citizens whose activities or ideas seemed harmful to the state. The gravity of the problem of serfdom – to which Radishchev had so strikingly drawn attention in his Journey from St Petersburg to Moscow as far back as 1790 – was appreciated, it is true. ‘There is no doubt that serfdom, in its present form, is a flagrant evil’, Nicholas admitted in 1842. But to attempt to remedy the problem now, Nicholas continued, would be an ‘evil even more disastrous’. Measures taken to mitigate the position of the serfs between 1833 and 1848 dealt only with peripheral aspects of the problem or specific abuses. Nor did Nicolaevan Russia have any coherent bourgeoisie which might have fought vigorously in its own interests for the abolition of serfdom and for political freedom. The ‘tradespeople’, as Custine observed, were ‘too few in number to possess any influence in the state’ and were besides ‘almost all foreigners’; a secular professional class, consisting of lawyers, doctors, academics, had barely begun to appear because the educational system was undeveloped; and the upper bureaucracy was drawn mainly from the ranks of the aristocracy and owed its allegiance to the Crown. The Russian social order of the 1840s therefore had a superficial appearance of immutability which was sustained by the theory of ‘Official Nationality’ (veneration of the ‘truly Russian conservative principles of Orthodoxy, autocracy and nationality’) expounded by Count Uvarov, Minister of Education from 1833 to 1849. Benkendorf succinctly gave expression to the official complacency when he wrote: ‘Russia’s past is admirable; her present more than magnificent; as to her future, it is beyond the grasp of the most daring imagination.’
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And yet if Custine’s impressions of the nature of the Russian régime were more or less accurate, nevertheless he failed altogether to perceive the beginnings of a cultural and intellectual life which would shortly rival that of his native France. (He rashly asserted, for example, that ‘under such an order of things, real life is too serious an affair to allow of a grave and thoughtful literature’; art would ‘never be a hardy plant’ in Russia.) ⁷ In fact an intelligentsia was coming into being which, with its spirit of independence, was altogether at odds with officialdom. Two immense and, as we shall see, interrelated tasks, above all others, preoccupied that intelligentsia, in the ‘marvellous decade’ of its development, between 1838 and 1848, during which Custine had visited Russia: the creation of an original and humane literature, and the solution of the question as to Russia’s historical relationship with Western Europe.

The rich literature which had begun to blossom in Russia in the 1820s and 1830s with the appearance of the poetry and prose of Pushkin and Lermontov and the stories of Gogol soon acquired an importance with which imaginative literature was not endowed in societies where independent educated opinion found freer expression. Literature did not explicitly put social problems, let alone offer solutions to them, but it did obliquely raise them in fictional form. It was demanded, as Mirsky has put it, that ‘every time a novelist gave his work to the world, it should contain things worth meditating on and worth analysing from the point of view of the social issues of the day’, and the demand was one which the novelists could never ignore. ⁸ (As this topical dimension to Russian literature developed, so writers quickly turned from poetry to prose, from subjective lyricism to examinations of reality which purported to be more or less objective, and, once prose had established itself, from the short sketch to the novel in which the fate of the individual could be examined against a larger and sometimes panoramic social background.) Not only did literature stir thought and feelings, however, it even seemed to a beleaguered intelligentsia to sustain civilised life itself: it would shake minds out of what Polevoy called their ‘banal vegetable inertness’. ⁹ It had an ‘organic’ quality, a vitality quite out of keeping with the social reality of Nicolaevan Russia, which by contrast was described by the intelligentsia as dormant, stagnant or moribund. Imaginative literature was a solitary source of light in the ‘kingdom of darkness’. ¹⁰
Portraits of early Russian liberals

The literature which thus began to flourish in the reign of Nicholas I was itself a product of the introduction into Russia of Western European culture and values. Peter the Great had prepared the ground for this westernisation of Russian culture by his far-reaching reforms and innovations at the beginning of the eighteenth century. But it was only after the Napoleonic wars, in which Russia had played an important role, that it became necessary for educated Russians to think deeply about the relationship of their nation to Western Europe. They had to ask themselves, in view of their country’s new prominence in European affairs, whether Russia was simply a backward nation aping Western forms and dependent upon the West for any progress she might make; or, to put the question another way, whether Russia had an individual identity of her own which entitled her to play an international role commensurate with her political prestige among the European nations after 1815. Chaadayev, in the gloomy atmosphere that prevailed in Russia after the failure of the Decembrist revolt in 1825, gave the most pessimistic answers to these questions in his first Philosophical Letter, which was published in 1836. Writing from ‘Necropolis’, the ‘city of the dead’ – by which he meant Moscow – Chaadayev compared Russia to the West in the most unfavourable terms. The Catholic form of Christianity, together with the ‘ideas of duty, justice, law, and order’ had endowed Western European civilisation with a coherence and a continuity, an organic unity, altogether lacking in Russia, whose history was merely a series of unconnected jolts. The fate of the members of the educated minority in Russian society could be compared to that of the nation as a whole (the analogy between an individual and his people was a popular one at this period). They lived a groundless and aimless existence. In their homes they were ‘like campers’, in their families ‘like strangers’ and in their cities ‘more nomadic than the herdsmen’ who grazed their animals on the Russian steppes. They lived ‘only in the most narrow kind of present without a past and without a future in the midst of a shallow calm’. In order to ‘take up a position similar to that of other civilised people’ they would have in a certain sense to ‘repeat the whole education of mankind’. They were in fact ‘superfluous men’, like Pushkin’s Onegin and Lermontov’s Pechorin, paralysed by introspective self-analysis, incapable of sound moral choices and living out their lives without useful purpose.
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Slavophilism

Chaadayev’s highly unflattering answer to the question as to Russia’s relationship with Western Europe was soon to be challenged by the so-called Slavophiles, whose doctrines arguably constituted the steadiest intellectual landmark in Russia in the 1840s. That is not to say that the small number of thinkers – Khomyakov, I. Kireyevsky, P. Kireyevsky, K. Aksakov, I. Aksakov and Samarín – who were chiefly responsible for the formulation of the body of thought that came to be known as Slavophilism reached unanimous agreement on the main questions of interest to them, still less that they formed any political grouping. Many of the major essays in which their views were most clearly expressed, moreover, were not written until the 1850s, so that there is some justification for the view that even as late as 1844–5 Slavophilism was ‘more a premonition than a doctrine’. Nevertheless the views of the Slavophiles on the civilisation of Western Europe, on the one hand, and on Russian Orthodoxy and the Russian people and their institutions, on the other, did already in the mid 1840s have a greater coherence than those of their opponents.

It must be said that the Slavophiles were themselves steeped in Western learning and much influenced by notions derived from Western thinkers, such as the concept of Volkstum, or national distinctiveness, which had been advanced by Herder and introduced into Russia through the philosophy of Schelling. Nevertheless Slavophilism is imbued with a deep hostility to Western European civilisation, which the Slavophiles tended to view – despite some acknowledgement of national variations – as a monolithic edifice built on the foundation of rationalism. An early but very characteristic statement of this view was contained in I. Kireyevsky’s essay, ‘In Reply to A. S. Khomyakov’, published in 1839. Kireyevsky posits three elements which he believes lie at the root of Western civilisation: the Roman form of Christianity; the heritage of the Barbarians who destroyed the Roman Empire; and the classical heritage of pagan antiquity. This classical heritage, which was lacking in Russia, seemed to Kireyevsky to represent in essence the triumph of man’s ‘formal reason over everything else within him and outside him’. The Roman Church, when it became separated from the Eastern, Orthodox Church, had suffered a similar fate: ‘rationalism’ had triumphed over ‘inner spiritual
reason’ in its teachings, which had as a consequence been corrupted. The Pope had become first the head of the Church in place of Christ and then, finally, an infallible secular ruler. The ‘totality of faith’ had come to rest on ‘syllogistic scholasticism’. Even the emergence of the institution of knighthood – which Kireyevsky viewed most unfavourably; he described knights errant as brigands serving the Church by slaughtering the innocents in return for a promise of expiation – was attributable to the pernicious influence of a Church prepared to sell its purity for temporal advantage. This supposed ascendency of formal reason over faith and tradition seemed to Kireyevsky to explain the ‘entire present fate of Europe’, its philosophy, its conception of ‘industrialism as the mainspring of social life’, its ‘ideal of soulless calculation’, the grasping ethos of the July monarchy in France, the veneration of ‘external formal relations’ and private property and the individual’s sense of isolation (we should now say ‘alienation’). All the best minds of Europe, Kireyevsky claimed, were currently complaining of the ‘condition of moral apathy, of the lack of convictions, of the universal egoism’ which he attributed to the ruinous influence of a Church that had lost the true spirit of Christ’s teaching.14

The loss of firm spiritual foundations afflicted Russia too inasmuch as the Russian educated class had been a prey, since the reforms of Peter the Great, the ‘destroyer’ of what was Russian,15 to the same maladies as the West. This theme was developed by Khomyakov in his essay on ‘The Opinions of Foreigners about Russia’, published in 1845 in Moskvityanin (The Muscovite), which was the main organ for the expression of Slavophilism at this period. For one hundred and fifty years, Khomyakov complained, Russians had placidly accepted any new system of fashion, the fruits of the labours of German philosophers and French tailors, without ever questioning their truth or quality. Russians took it on trust, for example, that political economy – a discipline much despised by the Slavophiles, a ‘science of wealth’, as Kireyevsky once called it16 – could have validity without making any reference to man’s moral motivations; or, again, that jurisprudence was entitled to the status of a science even though it took no account of conceptions of moral law which alone could give human law some binding force. This tendency to Europeanise Russian culture inevitably bore certain ‘fruits’, notably a proud disdain for all that was native. Thus a profound rift developed between the spiritual and intellectual
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essences of the nation, between its autochthonous life and the alien culture which had been grafted on to it.\textsuperscript{17}

The key to the resolution of this duality was to be found, the Slavophiles believed, in Christianity as it had been preserved in Russia, that was to say Orthodoxy. Unlike the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church had not been compromised over the centuries – or so the Slavophiles contended – by association with secular power, nor had it given rise to a tradition of rationalistic philosophical speculation, or to a materialistic legal system sanctifying private property-ownership. It had therefore remained true, as its designation ‘Orthodox’ implied, to the pure Christian doctrines as they had been established at the early ecumenical councils between the fourth and seventh centuries. It also gave its members a sense of true brotherhood, of conciliarism (\textit{sobornost‘}) or community within the Christian fold, a concept to which Khomyakov in particular devoted much attention in his ecclesiological writings. These Orthodox principles – belief in the primacy of faith over reason, of spiritual over rational wisdom, emphasis on ‘inner freedom’ as opposed to submission to external authority and on Christian brotherhood rather than republican \textit{‘fraternité’} – the Slavophiles fondly believed would provide a firm basis for the future development of Russian society. Indeed, they even hoped, as Kireyevsky intimated in a celebrated ‘Review of the Contemporary Condition of Literature’ (1845), that their Orthodox Christianity would serve as a ‘necessary supplement’ to the culture of Western Europe and a source of renewal for a dying civilisation, the distinctive contribution to history of a tribe which had not hitherto had a universal significance.\textsuperscript{18}

The moral principles embodied in Orthodoxy were preserved, the Slavophiles believed, among the Russian people, the mass of the peasantry who had been relatively untouched by Westernisation and were therefore unaffected by the formalism, rationalism and individualism that were supposed to pervade Catholic cultures. The Russian people kept alive a sense of real justice, ‘not merely that dead justice which the legalist-formalist will justify, but the living justice to which human conscience conforms and to which it submits’. Khomyakov describes the function of the arbitrator (\textit{posrednik}) in order to illustrate the point. The arbitrator carries no formal authority but by virtue of his impartiality and ‘conciliatory benevolence’ enjoys a moral authority to which the Russian will
readily submit. Russian peasant society, therefore, was still bound together by ‘bonds of true brotherhood, not conditional agreement’. The different attitudes of the people towards their late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century rulers, Boris Godunov and Mikhail Romanov, again demonstrated their observance of ‘purely moral principles’ which were quite alien to the Western world. They had regarded Godunov as a man who had insinuated himself into power, having pushed aside his rivals, and the legality of his election as their ruler was merely external, apparent rather than real. Mikhail, on the other hand, they regarded as a man whom they had elected themselves and therefore gladly entrusted their fate to him. Their ability to make this distinction again showed their understanding of the difference between formal and true legality.19

Above all, the unspoiled, truly Christian character of the Russian people was expressed in the obshchina, or peasant commune. By their practice of periodically repartitioning the land available to them in accordance with the changing needs of the families in the village community, by their communal use of resources such as woodland, pastures and fishing grounds and by their discussion of their corporate affairs at an assembly at which all had a voice, the Russian peasants seemed to the Slavophiles to reveal a spirit of collectivism analogous to the brotherly ethos of the Orthodox Church and antithetical to the individualism regnant in Western society. The commune was therefore a ‘moral choir’, as K. Aksakov once described it, an active social expression of the concept of conciliarism.20 It is worth noting that this view derived some support from the Prussian aristocrat, von Haxthausen, who traveled in Russia in 1843 and whom some of the Slavophiles met personally. Haxthausen described the commune as ‘one of the most remarkable and interesting political institutions in existence’. Drawing attention to the peasants’ practice of dividing the land equally among the commune’s members, he suggested that the institution reflected the feeling of the Russian peasant that the land was a common heritage to be shared among all the members of the great ‘national family’. He also anticipated that the commune would protect Russia both from the ‘pauperism and proletarianism’ of the modern West and from the ‘doctrines of communism and socialism’ to which bourgeois society was inevitably giving rise.21

It is useful, finally, to bear in mind the quite precise and understandable causes that may be postulated for the emergence of
Slavophilism. On one level it may be interpreted as a riposte to the scathing criticisms to which Russian culture had been subjected since the mid 1830s, notably by Chaadayev and Custine. (Khomyna-
kov’s ‘article on foreigners’ opinions of Russia begins with a com-
plaint about the mixture of ‘fear and contempt’ in foreigners’
accounts of their travels in Russia and bemoans their abuse of
Russian hospitality.)22 But on another level Slavophilism may
legitimately be seen as the expression of a desire to cling to an
economic and social order that was by the 1840s being threatened.
The leading Slavophiles were all from wealthy families with large
landed estates and their values were those of the pious nobleman
gravitating towards an idyllic rural community of which he was the
unchallenged paternalistic head. This order would not long survive
the further decay of the gentry, the economic and social ascendancy
of more plebeian elements and the further penetration into Russia
of poisonous Western doctrines, based on rationalism and egoism,
and of European capitalism, which the Slavophiles found repellent.

‘Westernisers’ and some Western influences on their thought

Understandable as Slavophilism may have been as an expression of
wounded national pride, it was by the mid 1840s already taken quite
literally by a large section of the intelligentsia as a provocative
defence of outmoded values and of a social and political order that
supposedly derived strength from them. As such, Slavophilism
came to serve as a sort of landmark by which thinkers who were not
Slavophiles and who aspired to a way of life more civilised than that
of Nicolaevan Russia could plot their own intellectual position and
from which they attempted to distance themselves. Thus it helped in
a negative, as well as a positive, way to shape the intellectual life of
the 1840s, by stimulating the discussion of values diametrically
opposed to it. That is not to say that the main opponents of the
Slavophiles – whom it is customary to designate ‘Westernisers’23
and who included Belinsky, Bakunin, Herzen, Granovsky, Botkin,
Annenkov and Kavelin – loved Russia any less dearly than the
Slavophiles themselves. We have only to recall Herzen’s famous
image of two-faced Janus or the two-headed eagle, which looked in
different directions, East and West, but in whose breast there beat the
same heart,24 to underline the fact that a sense of patriotic
commitment was not the exclusive property of the Slavophiles. But
Portraits of early Russian liberals

it is arguable that the Slavophiles’ juxtaposition of a moribund West and a vital Russia, of rationalism and spiritual truth, of the rights of the individual and the supremacy of the collective, of juridical and moral law, and the adverse comparison of the former with the latter term in each pair, greatly helped the ‘Westernisers’ to clarify their own views of the Western values and institutions which were being decried.

It has to be said, however, that once a common antipathy to Slavophilism has been taken into account the ‘Westernisers’ appear even less united as a group than their opponents. It is therefore perhaps best to consider them as the products of common Western intellectual influences rather than as the exponents of specific ideas to which all subscribed. And of all these influences the first and most important was the philosophy of Hegel, which all the ‘Westernisers’ imbibed in one form or another in the late 1830s (and which the Slavophiles saw as the last stone in the edifice of Western rationalism, the stone in fact that finally brought the whole edifice crashing down). Granovsky, Bakunin and Botkin all belonged, and Herzen was close, to the circle of the saintly Nikolay Stankevich, who played such an important role in the introduction of German philosophy, particularly that of Hegel, into Russia. Together they plunged ‘headlong into the “German sea”’, to use Turgenev’s expression.\textsuperscript{25} They discussed Hegel ‘incessantly’, Herzen recalled:

there was not a paragraph in the three parts of the Logic, in the two of the Aesthetic, the Encyclopaedia, and so on, which had not been the subject of desperate disputes for several nights together. People who loved each other avoided each other for weeks at a time because they disagreed about the definition of ‘all-embracing spirit’, or had taken as a personal insult an opinion on ‘the absolute personality and its existence in itself’. Every insignificant pamphlet published in Berlin or other provincial or district towns of German philosophy was ordered and read to tatters and smudges, and the leaves fell out in a few days, if only there was a mention of Hegel in it.\textsuperscript{26}

Philosophy in general was an attractive subject for noble minds denied other pabulum, but Hegelianism had particular merits for the Russian intelligentsia. It was not only the latest but also among the most intellectually demanding, stimulating and comprehensive of systems. Moreover, Hegel’s examination of the relationship between the finite and the infinite, the individual and the Absolute had an almost religious significance that was appealing to intel-