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PART I

Context

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CHAPTER I

*Introduction**William Leatherbarrow and Derek Offord*

In chapter 2 of this volume David Saunders comments on how in the 1950s and 1960s ‘Russian thought used to be fashionable’, occupying centre stage in English-language historical writing. This association of ‘Russian thought’ with historical scholarship implicitly raises the question of what precisely is the subject we are attempting to address in this volume. Not all scholars would necessarily embrace the view that it is primarily a mode of Russian historical study, although all surely would acknowledge the close association between ‘history’ and ‘thought’. The approaches (and even the titles) of some of the major English-language works on the subject betray this uncertainty. While the works of Nicholas Riasanovsky, Martin Malia, Marc Raeff and Richard Pipes, for example, consistently seek to locate Russian thought primarily within the context of social and political history, the three-volume anthology edited in the 1960s by James M. Edie, James P. Scanlan, Mary-Barbara Zeldin and George L. Kline suggests a much broader understanding in its title *Russian Philosophy*. It sets out to be the first historical anthology of ‘Russian philosophical thought’, and alongside examples of socio-political thought it includes metaphysical philosophy by thinkers such as Berdiaev, Shestov, Frank and Lossky, as well as the work of ecclesiastical and religious thinkers like the ‘Russian Socrates’ Skovoroda and the pre-revolutionary ‘theologians’ Fedorov and Solovev – figures who do not always find their way into other treatments of Russian thought. Nevertheless, the editors of *Russian Philosophy* do concede the important point that Russian speculation, even when apparently at its most abstract, has always been ‘man-centred’ and, unlike its western counterpart, non-professional and non-academic.¹ Its practitioners have emerged to a strikingly large degree from the literary world, rather than from the academic disciplines of philosophy or history, and their involvement with ‘philosophy’ has rarely been pure (in the sense of objective or non-committed). Although, as Galin Tihanov shows in chapter 14, a more mature philosophical tradition did emerge in the twentieth century, by and large Russian

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thinkers have wielded ideas not as keys to remote and abstruse truths, but as weapons in the struggle for moral, social, historical or political justice, a struggle that has motivated their entire quest for the meaning of life, nature and history and imbued it with personal commitment along with what Edie, Scanlan, Zeldin and Kline call ‘a special intensity and an impatience with moderation’.²

A similar recognition of the ‘close association’ between philosophy and social thought informs Andrzej Walicki’s seminal work *A History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism* (first English edition 1979). Walicki argues that philosophy failed to establish itself as an autonomous discipline partly because of its comparatively late appearance in a Russia where independent thought was strictly controlled, but also because growing awareness of pressing social problems ‘distracted attention from issues not immediately related to social practice’.³ Indeed, he goes further, asserting that any study of Russian thought that confined itself to pure philosophy (i.e. ‘professional’, ‘formalistic’ or ‘academic’ speculation) would ‘give an impoverished picture of the history of Russian ideas’ because of the lack of originality of such thought and its dependence on western European models: ‘[Russian thought’s] striking originality can only be perceived when we examine it in the context of Russian intellectual history, i.e. from the point of view of the issues that were closest to the hearts of educated Russians, and felt by them to be the most relevant to the future of their country’.⁴

This notion of Russian thought as ‘intellectual history’ is taken up in the very title of Raeff’s anthology (1966), which sets out to illustrate ‘the writings and ideas that have helped to shape the social and political consciousness of modern Russia’.⁵ Raeff’s volume contains an illuminating introduction in which Isaiah Berlin (who did so much to promote awareness of and respect for Russian thought in the English-speaking world in the 1950s and 1960s) explores more fully the concept of intellectual history in its Russian context. Berlin argues that ‘intellectual history’ is not a clear or self-explanatory concept and that it lacks the precision of histories of ideas in more specific or technical disciplines such as political, economic, social, scientific, philosophical or mathematical thought. Instead, intellectual history deals with ‘general ideas’ that are in the air at a given moment and form the ‘intellectual background’ or ‘climate of opinion’ – ‘beliefs, attitudes, and mental and emotional habits, some of which are vague and undefined, others of which have become crystallized into religious, legal, or political systems, moral doctrines, social outlooks, psychological dispositions, and so forth’.⁶ In Russia such general ideas became the province of an emerging

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and increasingly isolated educated class (although ‘class’, with its implications of a distinct socio-economic layer, is the wrong word here) that seized upon the realm of thought as a means to articulate deep concerns that were denied expression in any other way. Such Russian practitioners of what has become known as ‘social thought’ (*obshchestvennaia mysl'*) were for the most part truly amateurs in whatever intellectual fields – politics, economics, religion, law, philosophy, etc. – they inhabited, but they brought to those fields an intensity, immediacy, practicality and commitment unknown to the specialist, along with a willingness to apply their ideas to the solution of the most pressing problems of the age. As a result, according to Berlin, ideas ‘played a greater and more peculiar role in Russian history than anywhere else’, and the study of Russian thought can thus explain much more than we might expect about Russian behaviour.⁷

It may be argued, therefore, that the present volume is concerned less with ideas than with how those ideas were wielded by an intellectual minority that by the 1860s had become known as the Russian *intelligentsia*, but which had its origins much earlier in the Russian Enlightenment and the serving nobility of the eighteenth century. As Berlin has observed, the most striking characteristic of that minority was not the intellectual inventiveness of its members, but the seriousness with which it took the ideas of others and transformed them through the intensity of its own sense of mission: ‘it surrendered itself to what it believed to be true with a lifelong singleness of purpose seldom known outside of religious life in the West’.⁸ Elsewhere Berlin evocatively develops this analogy, writing that the concept of intelligentsia ‘must not be confused with the notion of intellectuals. Its members thought of themselves as united by something more than mere interest in ideas; they conceived themselves as being a dedicated order, almost a secular priesthood, devoted to the spreading of a specific attitude to life, something like a gospel.’⁹ A similar view is offered by Annenkov, who moved easily among the leading westernised intellectuals of the 1830s and 1840s and left in his memoirs an account of a gathering at the village of Sokolovo in the summer of 1845, a gathering that included Herzen and Granovsky and which Annenkov compared to ‘a militant order of knights, which had no written charter’, but which ‘stood athwart the whole current of contemporary life’.¹⁰ Likewise, the later observer of Russian intellectual life Mikhail Gershenzon also identified this dedicated, self-effacing, quixotic characteristic in the Russian intelligentsia:

When you picture in your mind the nature of the average Russian *intelligent* one typical feature immediately strikes you: that here is a person who above all else has

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from his earliest years been living *outside himself*, in a quite literal sense; that is to say, acknowledging as the only object worthy of his interest and concern something lying beyond his personality – the people, society or the state. Nowhere in the world does social opinion reign as despotically as among us, and for two-thirds of a century our social opinion has been founded upon acknowledgement of the supreme principle that to think about one's personality is egoism and somehow indecent. The only true man is he who ponders upon social matters, takes an interest in social questions, and works for the common good.¹¹

G. M. Hamburg deals in detail with the complex and multifaceted nature of the Russian intellectual minority and the multiple meanings of the term 'intelligentsia' in chapter 3, where he brings lucidity to a confusing topic by carefully plotting the interaction of the different social venues in which various Russian intelligentsias operated from the eighteenth century onwards. This approach sheds new and welcome light on the shape of pre-revolutionary Russian cultural life, and it helps us to avoid traditional oversimplifications both in how we define the intelligentsia and in the qualities we ascribe to it. It is tempting here, though, to speculate further on what might have created the chivalric, cabalistic and dedicated qualities identified in the Russian intelligentsia (in the broadest sense of the term) by Annenkov, Gershenson, Berlin and many others. Certainly, youth and a love of intrigue, along with a sense of the inadequacy of contemporary social and political life, must have drawn many into the clandestine discussion groups of the 1830s and 1840s, just as those same qualities had drawn a previous generation into the masonic lodges, where exclusivity and ritual stimulated the heady sense of being an elect with a mission. A clear, albeit fictional instance of the latter is to be found in Pierre Bezukhov in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. The masonic lodges and political circles of the first four decades of the nineteenth century thus fulfilled, as Philip Pomper observes, a variety of complex social and psychological needs.¹² Moreover, many members of the eighteenth-century educated nobility and the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia must have been at least aware of their isolation as a social group, notwithstanding Hamburg's argument that sociability was a key factor in the spread of ideas and that alienation should not be seen as the sole motor of the intelligentsia's evolution. The spread of enlightenment among members of the nobility in the wake of westernisation had created a small educated elite and thus added a further layer to the estrangement of that class from those below. Such alienation from 'the masses' is, of course, an inevitable consequence of socially selective education, and it has been experienced by the intellectual minorities of other nations. What made the eighteenth-century educated Russian nobleman so

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different, along with his descendants among the nineteenth-century intelligentsia, was the completeness of their isolation. As well as being cut off from below (which almost certainly did not bother them), they were also to a certain extent estranged from above – denied a fully meaningful participation in Russian political life by the autocracy's insistence upon the indivisibility of monarchical power. What is more, government and educated public were eventually to part company in Russia, each becoming suspicious of and hostile to the aspirations of the other.¹³ Saunders's account of the relationship between the Russian educated public and the key formal institutions of the state – authoritarianism and autocracy, the agencies of state repression, censorship, legal institutions and penalties, social and economic policy, education and official ideology and so forth – provides an illuminating perspective on that process.

The result of all this was the emergence of a peculiarly self-enclosed and self-conscious intellectual minority, acutely aware of the social and moral obligations imposed upon it by the privilege of enlightenment. Yet in any attempt to explain the deep sense of obligation shared by members of that minority, due account must be taken of a view argued by many (though not all) commentators – that the nineteenth-century Russian *intelligent* was, in Gershenzon's words, 'the direct descendant and heir of the Voltairean serf-owner'.¹⁴ Raeff goes yet further, arguing that 'a straight line of spiritual and psychological filiation connects the servicemen of Peter the Great to the revolutionaries of the nineteenth century'.¹⁵ In other words, the origins of the Russian intelligentsia and its cast of mind must be sought in the enlightened nobility of the eighteenth century, a class of people whose original *raison d'être* had been state service (the term 'servicemen' – *sluzhilye liudi* – was used to describe them), but who had gradually been emancipated from their service obligations to the state during the eighteenth century – a process significantly coterminous with the spread of enlightenment within that class.

The social composition of the Russian educated minority indeed changed significantly as it developed from the service nobility of the eighteenth century to the middle-class revolutionaries (*raznochintsy*) of the nineteenth.¹⁶ Yet it would appear that the eighteenth-century nobleman's sense of an obligation to serve survived within that minority, evolving from a sense of duty to the state, through an engagement with more abstract concepts such as self-improvement, the common good (*obshchee blago*), patriotism, truth and justice, before finally settling into an awareness of, and commitment to, the Russian people. This process of discovery of the *narod* by a peculiarly obligated intellectual minority probably began with the

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return of noblemen to their estates following their emancipation from state service, and it was certainly accelerated by the spread of Enlightenment ideas on the rights of man and by the subsequent impact of Sentimentalism and Romanticism, with their preoccupation with the common man. But, as Derek Offord shows in chapter 11, it developed apace in the nineteenth century as Russian intellectuals constructed their own images of the Russian *narod* in their attempts to clarify their vision of the Russian nation and of their own role within it. From the Slavophiles' utopian vision of the people as the heart of an apolitical moral organism and the essence of Russia's national distinctiveness, via the Westernisers' assessment of the people as the potential beneficiaries of humanitarian improvement and emancipation on the basis of western ideas (and, ultimately, as the bearers of 'Russian socialism'), through to the near-worship of the common folk during the Populist movement of the 1870s – the Russian *narod* consistently lay at the heart of the Russian intelligentsia's efforts to refine its understanding of itself and its mission.

A variety of key ideas and concepts litters the path of the Russian intelligentsia's intellectual evolution, but to a large extent these all have their origins in the processes of westernisation and enlightenment that accompanied the emergence of a Russian educated elite. The cultural westernisation that marked the reign of Catherine the Great not only fostered the development of an educated, Europeanised elite who came to question the principles on which their native Russia had historically rested, but also provided an intellectual framework for that questioning. The key philosophical principles of the Age of Reason rested on a belief that the laws of nature underpinning the physical world were ultimately knowable and that man's increasing enlightenment would enable him first to understand and then to control the world he inhabited. Such faith in the power of reason and the perfectibility of man in turn coloured Enlightenment views on man's relationship to society, and it fostered the belief that societies were perfectible if based upon rational social relations and an enlightened code of law. The 'irrationality' and inhumanity of such traditional Russian institutions as autocracy and serfdom became all too apparent to those Catherine had sent to study abroad, and this contributed more than anything to political disaffection and the emergence of critical social thought. In chapter 4 of this volume Gareth Jones traces the processes of westernisation and enlightenment in Russia from the reforms of Peter the Great, relating them to the 'norms' of the European Age of Reason and showing how they penetrated all areas of Russian cultural life. Initially, educated society sought to propagate Enlightenment values in cooperation with the state, in the

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form of the 'enlightened despot' Catherine had initially appeared to be. But her response to the French Revolution and subsequent treatment of Radishchev for his criticisms of autocracy and serfdom in *A Journey from St Petersburg to Moscow* (1790) demonstrated clearly the limitations of autocracy's ability to reform itself and marked the beginning of 'the parting of ways' of government and educated public.

Jones recognises that although its central core 'was the urge to modify the way that men and women had traditionally thought and behaved', Enlightenment thought was kaleidoscopic in nature, even assuming conservative and religious forms. This reminds us that there has traditionally been a tendency in both English-language and Russian scholarship on Russian social thought to emphasise its liberal and radical manifestations. Although the increasing identification of the Russian nineteenth-century intelligentsia with reformist and revolutionary aims means that this emphasis is understandable (and, indeed, it is reinforced in this volume), there has been a tendency (in spite of the work of a number of scholars, most of them North American) to play down the extent and strength of Russian conservative thought in the classical period. Moreover, there is little justification for dismissing Russian conservative thought as mere obscurantism. In chapter 5 William Leatherbarrow attempts to restore some balance by addressing the nature of conservative thought between the Enlightenment and the Great Reforms of the 1860s. In arguing that Russian conservatism was much more than mere resistance to change, he seeks to identify its nature through consideration of the philosophy of history implicitly or explicitly expressed by key conservative thinkers of the period, as well as in their attempts to construct a unique cultural identity for Russia that would stand in opposition to the philosophical absolutes and universal concepts of social progress characteristic of the Enlightenment.

Conservative emphasis on a specifically Russian way that would confront and resist the processes of westernisation gained much support from Russia's triumph over Napoleon and the subsequent march on Paris. Russian national consciousness, already stimulated by the growth of Russian historical study (in particular, the work of Karamzin), was reinforced by the fact that Russia now found herself a major power at the heart of Europe and no longer merely a junior partner hungry for the crumbs from Europe's technological and cultural feast. Moreover, it was not only conservative thinkers who found themselves swept up in a tide of Romantic nationalism. The development of Russian Romanticism and the displacement of Enlightenment rationalism by metaphysical idealism in the course of the 1820s marked a major shift in the entire direction of Russian thought.

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The nature of Russia and her relationship with the West, which had been an issue since the reign of Peter the Great, now came to dominate Russian social and historical thought. What was most striking was the way in which Russian thinkers of the period, Slavophiles as well as the so-called Westernisers, sought to refine their understanding of Russia against the templates they had constructed of the West. Indeed, as Vera Tolz argues in chapter 9, 'the West (*zapad*) had become the most important ingredient of modern Russian identity'. In her essay Tolz carefully traces the various spatial, cultural, political and economic images of the West constructed by Russian intellectuals as they developed their 'reactive nationalism' of national cultural and historical difference, a form of nationalism that was to become a model for national leaders in the colonial and post-colonial age.

The Russian intellectual's preoccupation with images of Europe should not be allowed to obscure the fact that at this time Russia was an imperial power with a history of expansion into both the south and the east. In a compelling image from his first 'Philosophical Letter', Chaadaev presented Russia as a sleeping giant suspended 'between the two great divisions of the world, between East and West, with one elbow resting on China and the other on Germany', a nation that should have united in its history 'the two principles of intellectual life, imagination and reason, and brought together in [its] civilisation the history of the entire globe'.¹⁷ Chaadaev's image, along with his warning that Russia had so far failed to find any meaningful identity or role in the great drama of world history (a warning that was in many respects to set the agenda for Russian thought from that point on), remind us that Asia was also a lure for the Russian mind. David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye's essay clearly demonstrates how identification with the East became a further way of articulating distance from the West and of refining the sense of national character and place in the world. Ironically, the imperialist adventure also allowed Russia to qualify as part of Europe, in that having an empire strengthened her credentials as a European nation. Indeed, while many Russian thinkers sought to distance themselves from westerners, the very act of looking towards Asia made them feel very much European. Schimmelpenninck not only traces the impact of Eurasianism on Russian thinkers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also shows how its resurgence in the post-communist period has contributed to a profound disillusionment with the West and to many Russians agreeing with the view of the film-director Mikhalkov that their nation is not Europe's backyard, but 'Asia's front door'.

From the point when the failure of the Decembrist Revolt in 1825 appeared to expose the limitations of Enlightenment thought and its faith

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in perfectibility on the basis of rational and legalistic principles, the Russian intellectual landscape was to be dominated for a generation by attempts to come to terms with the implications of German metaphysical idealism for Russian social reality. The ideas of Schelling, Fichte and, after 1837, Hegel underpinned the evolution of both westernising and Slavophile tendencies in the intelligentsia. Slavophiles, despite their increasing antipathy to western culture as a model for their own land, drew upon the organicism of such thought in order to articulate their vision of the Russian social order, a vision described in this volume in the essays by Leatherbarrow, Tolz and Offord. Less straightforward were the ways in which representatives of the westernising intelligentsia engaged with German idealism. Initially drawn to metaphysics as an escape from the depressing reality of post-Decembrist Russia, the Westernisers increasingly came to see the thought of Hegel in particular as a way of defining and justifying their relationship to that reality. The process is illustrated in the intellectual trajectory of Belinsky: detached from social and political realities by his discovery of Schelling, he initially saw those realities as the shortcomings of an imperfect and insubstantial physical world best forsaken for the world of the ideal as disclosed by aestheticism and art. Subsequently, on the basis of his understanding of Hegel, to whose ideas he was introduced by Bakunin, Belinsky endured a painful discovery of reality. At first, Belinsky found solace in the notion that history was the logical outcome of a supreme Idea evolving dialectically towards an absolute, for at a stroke it accounted for the negative aspects of reality and indicated the attitude that a rational man should adopt towards that reality – one of philosophical reconciliation. The result of this was an eccentric period in the life of one who was in due course to achieve lasting fame as a critic of reality: in the late 1830s Belinsky wrote several articles in which he called upon the individual to submit to the rationality of reality – even to such distasteful manifestations of it as Russian tsarist autocracy – or risk being crushed ‘under the leaden weight of its gigantic palm’.¹⁸ Such conservatism, however, went against the grain of Belinsky’s proud and independent nature, and by 1840 he was beginning to manifest a growing distaste for reconciliation, repudiating his ‘Hegelian’ passivity and turning to the writings of European socialist thinkers in order to articulate an impassioned criticism of the reality he had tried so earnestly to vindicate.

In a letter to Botkin of 11 December 1840 Belinsky conceded that the flaw in his reading of Hegel had been his failure to develop ‘the idea of negation as a no less sacred historical right, without which the history of mankind would become a stagnant, stinking swamp’.¹⁹ Herzen, too, was soon to recognise the importance of negation, arguing that Hegel’s thought was not