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From National Backwardness to Revolutionary Leadership: Alexander Herzen's *Book On the Development of Revolutionary Ideas in Russia*

Derek Offord

On the one hand, the Russian government is not Russian, but in general despotic and reactionary. It is more German than Russian, as the Slavophiles say, and that is what explains the sympathy and love with which other governments turn to it. St Petersburg is the new Rome, the Rome of universal slavery, the metropolis of absolutism; that is why the Emperor of Russia fraternizes with the Emperor of Austria and helps him to oppress Slavs. The principle of his power is not national, and absolutism is more cosmopolitan than revolution.

On the other hand, the hopes and aspirations of revolutionary Russia coincide with those of revolutionary Europe and portend their future alliance. The national element that Russia brings is the freshness of its youth and a natural leaning towards socialist institutions.

The impasse at which the states of Europe have arrived is plain to see. They need either to make a decisive leap forward or retreat further than they have. The antitheses are too inexorable, the questions too glaring and too far developed by sufferings and animosities for one to stop at half-measures or peace-making between authority and liberty. Yet if there is no safety for States in the form in which they presently exist, the manners in which they might die may be quite different. Death may come through palingenesis or putrefaction, revolution or reaction. The conservatism that has no aim but preservation of a worn-out status quo is just as destructive as revolution. It annihilates the old order, not by the raging fire of inflammation but by the slow fire of atrophy.

If conservatism gains the upper hand in Europe, imperial power in Russia will not only crush civilization, it will destroy the whole class of civilized men, and then ...¹

Alexander Herzen's short book *On the Development of Revolutionary Ideas in Russia*, from which the above passage is taken, was first published in 1851. It is important to bear in mind that the book belongs to a cycle of works that appeared in Western Europe (in French, Italian, German or English, in the first instance) in the years immediately following the revolutionary uprisings of 1848–9 and the counter-revolutionary response to them, which included the dispatch of Russian troops in the summer of 1849 to crush the Hungarian Revolt. This cycle – which also contained articles or essays entitled 'Russia' (1849), 'The Letter of a Russian to Mazzini' (1850), 'The Russian People and Socialism' (1851) and 'Russia and the Old World' (1854)² – was directed primarily at a western public, which was largely ignorant of and hostile towards Russia, rather than at Russian readers. Herzen's aim in it was partly to win support in the west for the emergent Russian intelligentsia as it began during the age of Nicholas I (ruled 1825–55) to wage a struggle against the Russian autocratic regime. More broadly, Herzen wished to convince western readers that Russia, backward though it was, had admirable qualities. In particular, Herzen argued in his cycle, the socialistic instincts of the Russian common people and institutions that still survived in the Russian countryside, such as the peasant commune and the village assembly, provided foundations for the establishment of the new western doctrine of socialism. Thus Russia, Herzen wanted his readers to believe, was a new world, a fresh force which had the capacity to regenerate European civilization.

It is equally important, as we consider *On the Development of Revolutionary Ideas in Russia*, to be aware that Herzen's cycle of essays on 'Russian socialism', as he called the set of ideas I have outlined, is one panel of a diptych. The other panel offered a view of Western Europe, the 'old world'. This view unfolds in two further collections of essays, namely *Letters from France and Italy* and the work that Herzen regarded as his masterpiece, *From the Other Shore*.³ Both of these collections incorporate Herzen's early first-hand impressions of the west, where he had arrived with his family, as a tourist, in 1847. (The nobleman's Grand Tour was to turn into permanent exile, because Herzen's sympathy for the European rebels of 1848 made it likely that if he returned to his native land then he would again – at best – suffer provincial exile, as he had in the 1830s and early 1840s.) In his *Letters from France and Italy* and *From the Other Shore* Herzen offered a crushing, contemptuous critique of modern European civilization, especially

of the France of the July Monarchy of Louis-Philippe (1830–48), the Second Republic (1848–51) and the beginnings of Louis-Napoleon's Second Empire (1852–70). On the economic level, Herzen observed, Europe was characterized by heartless capitalism. On the social level, it was dominated by the mercenary bourgeoisie, which Louis-Philippe's minister François Guizot had famously advised to enrich itself. On the political level, 'liberals', who represented the interest of the bourgeoisie, were in the ascendant.

These two contemporaneous cycles of writings (one in which Herzen set out evidence that seemed to augur well for the establishment of socialist utopia in Russia and another in which he hoped to prove that the west was in its death throes) are complementary elements in a representation of Russia's national position and mission. I shall begin my discussion of the place of Herzen's book *On the Development of Revolutionary Ideas in Russia* within this corpus by summarizing its contents and the various models of revolution with which Herzen had to reckon. I shall then clarify Herzen's understanding of revolution at this period and consider his treatment of the emergent Russian intelligentsia. Finally, I shall point to the strong nationalistic complexion of Herzen's concept of revolution, which makes it easy to understand the aversion his views aroused in his more internationalist contemporaries Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. It is no doubt this colouring, together with Herzen's rose-tinted characterization of the Russian peasantry in it, that accounts for the neglect of this work by Herzen's scholarly admirers, most notably Isaiah Berlin and his pupil Aileen Kelly, though it should also be said that the other authors of major scholarship on Herzen which I cite at the end of this chapter have not analysed it very closely either.⁴

Herzen begins his book with a chapter on 'Russia and Europe', affirming the paradigm that had become established in Russian thought in the 1830s and 1840s in the early stage of the debate between the so-called Westernizers (a group to which Herzen himself belonged) and Slavophiles.⁵ According to this paradigm, 'Europe', or 'the West', despite its internal divisions, was a coherent entity against which 'Russia' was to be measured. Next, in a chapter on 'Russia before Peter I',⁶ Herzen offered an idyllic account of the earliest stage of recorded Russian history, from the ninth century. The indigenous East Slav people, he argued, soon absorbed the Scandinavian Varangians, who, according to the foundation myth of the Russian state, had been invited to rule over them. They lived in harmony in rural communities, holding possessions in common and reaching unanimous decisions about community affairs under the guidance of patriarchal elders (25–6). In his third chapter, Herzen discussed Peter himself, his westernizing reforms and the formation of a European society in the age

of Catherine II (1762–96). In Chapter 4, he considered the period between Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812 and the Decembrist Revolt of 1825, during which secret societies sprang up and a 'truly revolutionary opposition' to the tsarist regime first developed (66 ff.). The fifth chapter concerns the burgeoning literature (poetry, prose and journalism) in which independent public opinion began to find expression in the age of Nicholas. Herzen then considered, in Chapter 6, the recent dispute between Slavophiles and Westernizers (or, as Herzen defined the respective bodies of thought, 'Muscovite Pan-Slavism' and 'Russian Europeanism'). Lastly, he provided an epilogue in which he clarified the general thrust of his book, and it is from this part of the work that I have taken the passage that is the starting point for my reading of this text.⁷

In addressing the subject of revolution, Herzen had several foreign examples before him. There was of course the French Revolution of 1789 and the Jacobin turn that that revolution had taken in 1793. Herzen speaks with respect of the Jacobins in other writings of the period with which I am concerned, even when he is considering them at their most murderous. In a passage in the *Letters from France and Italy*, for example, he sympathetically compares the instigators of the revolutionary terror with those counter-revolutionary Frenchmen who brutally put down insurgents during the 'June Days' of 1848.⁸ Then there was the revolution that ended the restored Bourbon monarchy in 1830. Most topically, there was the Parisian revolution of February 1848, which had overthrown Louis-Philippe and sparked insurgencies or unrest in Italian and German states and parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Herzen refers explicitly to this revolution in the book examined here (119), although he naturally deals with it in greater detail in his writings about the west.

Russian history too was punctuated by events such as palace coups and the rise or fall of court favourites which sometimes amounted to 'revolutions' (47). Russia's most important revolutionary event to date, though, was the Decembrist Revolt of 1825, which had been inspirational for the young Herzen. This was a failed mutiny of military officers whose views ranged from constitutionalism and federalism on the American model, as commended by Nikita Murav'ev, to dictatorial republicanism on the Jacobin model, as advocated by Pavel Pestel. The tsarist state had also been periodically threatened in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by elemental peasant revolts, especially the Pugachev uprising (1773–4), which is mentioned several times by Herzen in his book (47, 51, 97) and the memory of which remained fresh among older generations when Herzen was growing up. More localized peasant disturbances still continued in the age of Nicholas (82). As for revolutionary ideas, socialism was

gaining a following among the young men who regularly met in the St Petersburg home of a young nobleman, Mikhail Petrashevskii, in the late 1840s to discuss the ideas of Charles Fourier and other French utopian thinkers.⁹

However, we shall miss the larger meaning of 'revolution', as Herzen understands it, if we confine our attention to such overt examples of overthrow of political regimes, insurgency, popular unrest, peasant rebellion or socialist thought as I have mentioned, ignoring in the process the broad thrust of the corpus of work in which *On the Development of Revolutionary Ideas in Russia* is situated. We need, for instance, to note the arresting fact that even among the Russian tsars, Herzen believes, a revolutionary was to be found. Peter I was 'a Jacobin before the time of the Jacobins and a revolutionary terrorist', for revolution, on the broadest plane, is a complete transformation of an old way of looking at the world. Peter wrought such a transformation, or put into effect a 'great revolutionary idea', because he broke down the introspective, patriarchal world view of late medieval Muscovy (40, 42, 62).¹⁰ Even Christianity was just as revolutionary in its early days as socialism in the modern age, Herzen argued at this time, because it helped to undermine the Roman Empire¹¹ (which is in Herzen's mind, it will be noted, as he speaks of Russian absolutism in the passage from his book that I have quoted).

Revolution, then, in Herzen's understanding of it, should not be construed as an exclusively political, economic or social transformation. It is notable that in the cycles of essays to which I have referred Herzen offers no very precise, concrete plans for change of these kinds. Nor, unlike his friend and close collaborator Nikolai Ogarev, did he reflect on the possible ways in which revolutionary forces might be organized for struggle. Rather he is concerned, as the title of his book suggests, with 'ideas'; he is an 'intellectual revolutionary'.¹² In fact, the sort of revolution with which he is chiefly preoccupied in his writings of the late 1840s and early 1850s, especially *From the Other Shore*, is personal: he stands for the emancipation of members of the intellectual, cultural and moral elite from the shackles of outmoded ideas and social conventions as well as from the chains placed on them by despotic political regimes.

To say all this is not to deny that social reform is an aspect of the revolution Herzen imagines (121). After all, as a political exile managing an uncensored press in London from the mid-1850s, Herzen would become a powerful voice in the movement to emancipate the serfs in Russia. We should also remember that in an autocratic state (of which the Russia of Nicholas I provided a classic example), as in more modern totalitarian polities, it is not so easy to separate the intellectual from the political sphere. Every thought and action that conflicts

with a prevailing orthodoxy, such as 'Official Nationality' in mid-nineteenth-century Russia, is potentially subversive, or, as Herzen puts it, any challenge to authority is a revolutionary act (86). Nonetheless, it is hard to see Herzen as a revolutionary socialist in the normal sense if we take the term to imply firm support for a significant degree of economic and social levelling.

Herzen's elastic understanding of the concept of revolution helped him to challenge the prevailing contemporary perception of Nicholas's Russia as Europe's principal counter-revolutionary bulwark. It enabled him to argue that there were in fact 'revolutionary' forces at work beneath the surface visible to foreigners during the reign of the 'gendarme of Europe'. This 'revolutionary Russia', as Herzen calls it in the passage quoted, turns out to be a minority of the nobility who represent the 'individual principle' and therefore 'opposition to absolutism' (38–9). More precisely, it is a section of the Muscovite nobility to which Herzen himself belonged. Unlike the St Petersburg nobility, who served at court or in the government and were allegedly motivated by selfish ambition, these independently minded men refused to serve the state and occupied themselves instead with the management of their estates and with learning and letters (82–3). They were 'the intelligence of the country', the 'organs of the people' who helped the people to understand their true position (113).

And yet, Herzen's description of this emergent moral and literary force as 'revolutionary' seems highly problematic. The bulk of the diverse collection of writers and thinkers whom Herzen associated in his book with the rise of independent literature and thought in the age of Nicholas cannot be classified as 'revolutionary' in any normal sense of the term, even if we allow that 'revolution' for Herzen at this time may have consisted primarily in an intellectual transformation. It is reasonable to talk of the poems of the Decembrist Kondratii Ryleev as revolutionary but not the early poems of Aleksandr Pushkin (68, 76), the 'philosophical letter' of Petr Chaadaev, the historiography and criticism of Nikolai Polevoi, the poetry of Aleksei Kol'tsov, Nikolai Gogol's novel *Dead Souls*, Ivan Turgenev's *Sportsman's Sketches* or Dmitrii Grigorovich's story *Anton the Unfortunate*. Nor were the so-called Westernizers so unequivocally and uniformly revolutionary as Herzen hoped his readers would believe when in his sixth chapter he drew a clear distinction between these representatives of 'Russian Europeanism' and the Slavophiles, who yearned for the supposedly organic community of pre-Petrine Muscovy. The Westernizers had assumed the mantle of the 'revolutionary' Peter I, Herzen implied when he claimed Peter '*is in us*' (117). Admittedly, it could truly be said of the future anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, to whom Herzen's book is dedicated, that he was already 'revolutionary', and

the literary critic Belinskii, 'furious Vissarion,' privately expressed enthusiasm for socialism and the Jacobins during the 1840s. However, even within the Westernist camp such representatives of revolutionism were in a minority in mid-nineteenth-century Russia. Indeed, Herzen's intolerant critique of western economic, social and political life during the early years of his emigration helped to cause a rift within that camp, alienating erstwhile companions such as the historian Timofei Granovskii.

Herzen's characterization of a significant part of the Russian cultural elite as 'revolutionary' is bound up in the passage I have quoted with another problematic assertion, namely that 'Russia' had 'a natural tendency towards socialist institutions.' This supposed proclivity to socialism (which Herzen associated first and foremost with the peasantry), coupled with the 'freshness,' the youthful vigour, that he attributed to the progressive nobility, constituted a distinctive 'national element' which Russia could bring to the mid-nineteenth-century European political ferment. The Russian government was not Russian, Herzen contended in the passage quoted, but the combined revolutionary forces of the socialistic peasantry and the progressive nobility definitely were. Thus revolution, for Herzen, was at bottom a nationalistic idea with roots in the Romantic age, in which European ethnic groups extolled their cultural distinctiveness. Pursuit of it was an enterprise in which a widely despised nation, taking advantage of the fact that her past was empty (112), might proudly lead the more advanced but now moribund civilization of Western Europe out of its present impasse. Lest any western reader should doubt that the key to Europe's salvation lay in Russia, Herzen introduced a threat about the consequences of rejection of his invitation to collaborate in the business of revolution. If Russia's autocratic regime remained unchecked, he opined, it would help the Habsburgs and the Hohenzollerns to crush revolution, destroying western civilization in the process (109, 113, 125). Herzen's ellipsis at the end of the last sentence in the passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter accentuates this air of menace.

It is debatable, then, to what extent and in what sense the libertarian Herzen of the late 1840s and early 1850s was revolutionary. Later, when confronted with the emergence of a more militant – and more plebeian – younger generation of socialists in Russia after the Crimean War, Herzen warned of the dangers of revolutionary destruction. Nonetheless, he did help to nurture in the Russian intelligentsia a deep and lasting antipathy towards capitalism, the bourgeoisie and liberal parliamentary democracy. He also laid a foundation for what would become known as 'Populism,' according to which Russia might follow an independent path to socialism, bypassing the capitalist phase of

economic development and exploiting the communitarian instincts attributed to the Russian peasant. The contribution of his book *On the Development of Revolutionary Ideas in Russia* to this foundation was essentially twofold. First, it yoked together in the imagination what Herzen saw as the two positive forces in Russian life, the progressive intelligentsia and the socialistic peasantry. Second, it exploited the paradigm of an opposition between Russia and Europe to persuade readers that seemingly backward Russia in fact had a vital role to play as revolution faltered in the 'old world'.

Further Reading

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