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Russian Conservatism in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century

The term "conservatism" will be understood here to mean the ideology which advocates for Russia an authoritarian government subject to restraints neither by formal law nor by an elected legislature but only of such limitations as it sees fit to impose on itself. Conservatism is the dominant spirit of Russia's political thought and practice. Since its emergence in the late fifteenth century it has undergone a steady evolution influenced in part by changes in the country's conditions and in part by the intellectual development of the educated elite. The evolution of conservative ideology in Russia went through four distinct phases, each of which produced a theory identified with a specific social group—the clergy, the gentry, the intelligentsia, and the bureaucracy. In Russian the four types can be called, respectively, *konservatizm tserkovnyi, dvorianskii, intelligentskii,* and *biurokraticheskii.* Our main concern will be with the third of these types, whose flowering occurred in the Golden Age of Russian political thought, the reign of Alexander II.

Clerical conservatism provided the justification of Muscovite absolutism from the fall of Constantinople to the Schism. During these two centuries the theoreticians of the Church not only endorsed the autocratic proclivities of the Grand Princes of Moscow, but encouraged them, sanctified them, and translated them into the language of political theory. This development, so different from the experience of the West, where the Church tended to oppose royal absolutism, had two principal causes: (1) After the collapse of Byzantium the Eastern Church required a secular protector; Russia, which at the very time had shaken off the last vestiges of Tatar-Mongol rule and emerged as a sovereign Orthodox state, was the only country capable of playing this role; and inside Russia, Moscow seemed the most plausible contender. (2) The emergence of heresies in the Orthodox Church, followed by the rise of a powerful reform movement whose adherents demanded that it divest itself of the immense landholdings it had acquired under Mongol rule, created for the Church great internal difficulties and increased further its dependence on the

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secular arm. To survive, the Church required an effective state, capable of acting on its behalf externally against Muslims and Catholics, and internally against heretics and reformers. The idea of *samoderzhavie* (*autokrateia*), which Church theoreticians formulated from the mid-fifteenth to the mid-sixteenth century and impressed on the Moscow princes, had this twin connotation: externally, it meant absolute sovereignty of the Russian monarch; internally, equally absolute domanial (*votchinnaia*) authority over the subjects. This theory, developed by the school of Joseph of Volokolamsk, was adopted by the monarchy under the Metropolitan Macarius, the most influential of the Josephite clerics.

The decline of clerical or churchly conservatism coincides with the decline in the fortunes of the Russian Orthodox Church. Nikon's disastrous attempt to introduce into Russia the principle of supremacy of church over state discredits the Church in the monarchy's eyes and at the same time fatally weakens it, because it results in the Schism. Influence now passes to ideologues trained in the Kievan Academy (Simeon Polotsky, Stefan Iavorsky, and, above all, Feofan Prokopovich), who, well versed in Western political theory, adopt and introduce into Russia the idea of *raison d'état*. Under Peter the Great, when the monarchy becomes secularized, the ideas of service to the state and of the political and social contract enter the vocabulary of Russian political thought, popularized by Peter's decrees and by the publicistic writings of his theorists.

Yet the idea does not enjoy a long life, because the Russian monarchy in the early eighteenth century is not strong enough to govern the country single-handed, as the Bourbons were doing. It must share power, and it shares it with the gentry, the principal servitor class. The critical event is the succession crisis of 1730. The gentry come to rescue the monarchy from an aristocratic challenge of a decidedly liberal nature, and, once the issue is resolved, strike a bargain. In return for obtaining virtual life-and-death authority over one-third of the country's population—the proprietary serfs—the gentry concede the monarchy a free hand over the remainder, as well as over the entire realm of high politics. In other words, they forfeit participation in the political process to be able to exploit undisturbed their own peasantry. The result is something akin to a dyarchy, and its high point is reached in the reign of Catherine the Great. The theoretical justification of this arrangement is heavily indebted to Montesquieu and rests on the contentions that (1) as a spacious country Russia requires a monarchic form of government and (2) a true monarchy (as distinct from a despotism) must rest on a powerful noble estate. The autocratic system is extolled as the most suitable for Russia, but at the same time it is qualified to entail a gentry who enjoy absolute power on their estates. This gentry-inspired

conservatism is most explicitly formulated in the writings of Shcherbatov and Karamzin, though it also has wide appeal to nonpolitical writers—among them, the mature Pushkin.

Gentry-based conservatism begins to decline with the accession of Paul I, but it remains the official theory of the autocracy until 1855. Its decline can be attributed to two principal causes: (1) the advent from the West of the idea of the nation, under the inspiration of which the monarchy begins to abandon the concept of the state divided into legal classes, imposes the first restrictions on gentry authority over their serfs, and ceases to transfer additional peasants into private hands, and (2) the great betrayal of the monarchy by the gentry in the Decembrist uprising. The monarchy, wishing to assert itself as the national leader and yet no longer trusting its own gentry, turns increasingly to the professional bureaucracy. The bureaucratization of Russia, which began under Catherine II, accelerates in earnest under Nicholas I.

The accession of Alexander II creates in Russia a situation entirely different from that which had prevailed since the mid-seventeenth century. The abolition of serfdom destroys the economic foundation on which gentry authority and privilege have rested and renders meaningless the ideal of a dyarchy. The government now makes a serious attempt to build a Russian nation. It reduces significantly the inequalities among the estates and involves the citizenry in local self-government and the dispensation of justice. An intense debate breaks out (with tacit government approval) over the future of Russia. The participants in it are intellectuals acting alone or grouped around partisan journals. Economic and social vested interests play small part in these debates, if only because each of the three principal tendencies (conservative, liberal, and radical) has among its champions representatives of the same class, namely the gentry, with a sprinkling of commoners. Because it is primarily a conflict of ideas, the intellectual level of post-1855 Russian political theory rises far above anything that has preceded it. All three tendencies, conservatism very much included, reject the status quo—none has an interest in preserving it, each wants radically to change it in a particular way. Russian conservatism ceases to be a static doctrine dedicated to preservation and becomes a theory of change. This development, of course, parallels the evolution of conservatism in the contemporary West: *mutatis mutandis*, it reflects the difference between the conservatism of a Metternich and that of a Bismarck.

The impetus comes from a cultural trauma—the sudden appearance around 1860 of the "nihilist." He is a new breed of man, the Western positivist exaggerated to the point of grotesqueness. He questions all institutions and norms—family, state, church, ethics, manners—and is prepared to abandon or destroy them if they fail to conform to his utilitarian and materialist criteria.

As the "nihilist" passes from word to action, he becomes an obsession with conservatives. To Russian conservatives of the 1860s and 1870s the "nihilist" is not merely a passing phenomenon but the symptom of all that is wrong with Western culture in general and with Russian Westernism in particular. He is a portent of terrible things. In the most general sense, post-1860 Russian conservatism is a theory of antinihilism, an attempt to provide an alternative to the frightening specter that Chernyshevsky's "new man" has raised before Russian society.

The new conservatism differs from the old, gentry-type conservatism in two important respects: (1) it is not longer elitist; its ideal is not harmony between autocracy and gentry but between autocracy and the people, the *narod*; it is explicitly antigentry; (2) it is no longer cosmopolitan (as gentry conservatism tended to be) but nationalist, and at times pronouncedly xenophobic. The democratic orientation and the nationalist sentiment reinforce one another insofar as the essence of the national spirit is considered to reside in the people, the ordinary, non-Westernized *narod*. In addition, the new conservatism, as pointed out earlier, is a movement of ideas not of interests. Its principal theorists are Ivan Aksakov, Danilevsky, Dostoevsky, Apollon Grigoriev, Katkov, Leontiev, Pobedonostsev, and Samarin.

The most common diagnosis of the causes of "nihilism" from the conservative side is that it results from the divorce of theory from life. The conservatives detest "abstraction": they would agree with Goethe that life fits theory as the human body fits the cross. They are nominalists; they extol life. Their terminology tends to be drawn from the language of biology, just as that of the radicals derives from mechanics. Insofar as they refer to philosophy, they go back to Schelling rather than to Hegel, and give preference to *Vernunft*, or what Khomiakov called "living knowledge" (*zhivoe znanie*), over *Verstand*, analytic reason. This loathing of abstraction is carried furthest by the two leading aesthetes of the movement, Grigoriev and Leontiev. Grigoriev goes so far as to deny implicitly the usefulness of all synthetic thinking. He believes only in living reality with all its smells and sights. Leontiev, although himself not averse to formulating abstract theories, in all his writings extols the spontaneous, specific, and colorful. Ethics to him is only a branch of aesthetics. We also find fulminations against "abstraction" in the writings of Samarin, Aksakov, and most of the other conservative writers.

This diagnosis given, the question remains: What accounts for the hold that "abstraction" has on educated Russians, especially the younger generation of the intelligentsia? The answer is unanimous: Westernization has divorced the educated classes from the *narod*. Man cannot exist as an isolated individual: to be creative, to be alive in the full sense of the word, he must belong to a national community. The term frequently used is *pochva*, the soil, in the

metaphoric sense of soul-nourishing Mother Earth. In the words of Ivan Aksakov: "Outside the national soil [*pochva*] there is no firm ground; outside the national there is nothing real, vital; every good idea, every good institution not rooted in the national historical soil or grown organically from it turns sterile and becomes nought."[1]

Or as Katkov puts it in his powerful review of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, in which he tries to account for Bazarov: "Man as an individual does not exist. Man is everywhere part of some living connection, or some social organization. . . . Man extracted from the environment is a figment, an abstraction. His moral and intellectual nature, or, more broadly, his ideas, acquire effectiveness only when derived from the environment in which a given man lives and thinks."[2]

These two related themes run through the writings of Russian conservatives in the period under discussion. Much of what they say recalls Burke, de Maistre, and Metternich, except that their attacks on abstraction and individualism have a special Russian twist. To them the striving of individuals to transform society in accord with abstract schemes is not only "presumption" or hubris—and, as such, inevitably doomed to fail—but also a severance of ties with the source of all that is creative. It is more than folly: it is spiritual death. In Dostoevsky's view Western education inevitably leads a Russian to crime. According to him Granovsky and Belinsky sired Nechaev,[3] and in *Besy* (*The Possessed*) he casts the analogue of Granovsky as the father of the bedeviled assassin.

As may be deduced from these premises, the conservatives reject, often vehemently, the radical view of the intellectual ("critically thinking personality") as the main agent of historic progress. Insofar as history may be said to be made at all, it is made by the masses. The conservatives, too, call on the intellectuals to "go to the people," but on their lips the slogan has a different sense from that used by the socialist revolutionaries. To them it does not mean raising the masses to the level of the intelligentsia, but reintegrating the intelligentsia with the people—abandoning intellectual presumptuousness and learning humility.

As was said earlier, the concept of the people, the *narod*—meaning the uneducated common people, loyal to simple Christianity—is central in post-1860 conservative Russian thought. Conservatives are as preoccupied with the subject of the people as the radicals are with the subject of the intelligentsia. This worship of the people, of course, derives from Slavophilism, whose outlook deeply impresses itself on the ideology of conservatism. But not all con-

1. Ivan Aksakov, *Sochineniia*, 7 vols. (Moscow, 1886–91), 2: 3–4.
2. *Russkii vestnik*, July 1862, p. 411.
3. F. M. Dostoevsky, *Pis'ma*, 4 vols. (Moscow and Leningrad, 1928–59), 3: 49–50.

servatives share the naïve admiration for the *muzhik*, characteristic of classical Slavophilism. To some, his greatness is only potential. This holds true of Samarin, but most of all of Ivan Aksakov, for whom the ignorant, illiterate, passive *narod* of the 1860s and 1870s is mere shapeless clay. To become a true nation, to become itself, it must rise from the level of the unconscious *narod* to that of a conscious *obshchestvo* or "society." This requires freedom and education, and Aksakov vigorously championed (often at a dear price to himself) untrammeled liberty of the press, effective local self-government, an independent judiciary, and schooling for the masses. Only by speaking freely and learning to govern their communities could the Russian people become a true nation; and only by resting its power on such a nation could the monarchy flourish and Russia progress. Aksakov's ideal of *obshchestvo*, very influential in its time, was later adopted by Peter Struve and became the foundation of his political philosophy.

In their political philosophy the conservatives were, by definition, in favor of absolutism or *samoderzhavie*. This does not mean, however, that they liked the Russian monarchy as it was then constituted. Most of them loathed the St. Petersburg establishment, and particularly its bureaucracy, which they considered as thoroughly poisoned with Westernism and as profoundly estranged from the sources of national life as the radical intelligentsia. Antibureaucratic sentiment was one of the most persistent traits of Russian conservatism until the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the conservatives supported what they considered a corrupt monarchy because any alternative to it seemed to them even worse. As Katkov once put it, if the absolute monarchy were abolished, despotism would take its place. The liberal solution did not satisfy them. First, it meant the formation of political parties, and that suggested constant partisan strife, the promotion of narrow class interests in the guise of national interest, and the perpetual disruption of national unity. Second, it meant increased influence of the *déraciné* intelligentsia, which through control of parties would dominate parliamentary institutions and in this manner impose its will on the nation. A revolution, of course, was for them an even more horrifying possibility. In supporting the autocracy, therefore, the conservatives were motivated not so much by royalist sentiment as by dread of the alternative, which they usually conceived as despotism by the "nihilist" intelligentsia. Samarin alone among them formulated a positive theory of absolutism. Influenced by Lorenz von Stein and the German *Kathedersozialisten* he developed a theory of "revolutionary conservatism," by which he meant a system in which the absolute monarchy used its unlimited power to carry out sweeping social reforms. ("Our government can easily assimilate the entire apparatus of revolutionary propaganda without conceding one iota of its authority," he wrote in *Revoliutsionnyi konservatizm*.)

In their attitude to history, the conservatives take a position diametrically opposed to that of the radicals. The radicals view the history of mankind as a single purposeful process directed by the intelligentsia and pointing to the complete emancipation of man. Conservatives tend to be skeptical of history. Some of them, in their aversion to abstraction, come close to denying the existence of history altogether. Apollon Grigoriev, for example, rejects the idea that "thinking, science, art, nationality, history" are "stages of some kind of progress," "peelings which the human spirit sweeps away" upon reaching the age of positive science—to him they represent "the eternal organic labor of eternal forces proper to man as an organism."[4] Other conservatives acknowledge the historical process but tend to view it in a cyclical rather than a unilinear manner. Examples are Danilevsky's theory of "cultural-historical types" and Leontiev's three-stage biology of civilization, formulated under Danilevsky's influence.

At its most fundamental, philosophical level, the argument between the conservatives on the one hand and the liberals and radicals on the other concerns the nature of man. To the radicals, man is by nature perfect: his shortcomings are entirely or mainly due to the imperfections of the institutions under which he is compelled to live. Once these are reformed in a "rational" manner, man shall at once reveal his true and noble self. In the words of Turgenev's Bazarov: "In a well-constructed society it will be quite irrelevant whether man is stupid or wise, evil or good." The conservatives are pessimists. As against this vision, they advance a concept of man as inherently corrupt. This view is sometimes grounded in the Christian notion of original sin, and sometimes in the biological fact of animal aggressiveness. In its most extreme form, this view of man finds expression in the writings of Dostoevsky. The central theme here is the proposition, based on an insight into human psychology far ahead of its time, that man harbors, under his civilized exterior, powerful irrational and destructive drives. Man's natural propensity is not to love but to hate, and all that keeps him from translating his hatred into murder is belief in the immortality of the soul and the fear of punishment after death. The pessimistic view of human nature, common also to Western conservatives, reinforces the belief in strong authority. It also produces aversion to political reform of any kind; for if the source of the world's troubles lies within man himself, what is the point, indeed, of tampering with institutions? To reform society one must first reform man.

In the 1880s this type of conservatism wanes, partly because its theorists die out and partly because socialist revolutionary terrorism drives conservatives toward the right, toward a rapprochement with the bureaucracy. The eclectic writings of Pobedonostsev echo some of the conservative ideas of the

4. Apollon Grigoriev, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1915), 2:146.

1860s and 1870s, but in a stultified form, without any of that spirit of democratic nationalism characteristic of the latter. Driven to desperation by the radicals, the post-1881 conservatives conclude that firm authority from above, even if it means rule by the bureaucracy and police, cannot be dispensed with. This ideological evolution coincides with the decision of the monarchy itself to abandon experimentation with nation-building and rely on repression pure and simple. Bureaucratic conservatism triumphs both in theory and in practice.

The ideological content of bureaucratic conservatism is extremely meager. Characteristic of it is mistrust of society grounded in the belief that once people are given freedom they rebel and destroy. It is the attitude of functionaries who regard every manifestation of public initiative as "insubordination" that must be repressed or, if that is not possible, subverted. "Zubatovshchina," the attempt to take hold of irrepressible national forces through police infiltration and police management, represents the acme of this process. Bureaucratic conservatism culminates in von Plehve's tenure of office as minister of the interior, when a systematic effort is made to use the police apparatus to direct the entire life of the country. At this point Russia ceases to be in any meaningful sense an autocracy and becomes, in Struve's words, a police state administered by means of "ubiquitous surveillance secretly carried out on the basis of secret instructions and circulars."[5] Here one can no longer speak of an ideology. Rather, what we have is a mentality: the mentality of a bureaucratic-police apparatus which acquires a vested interest in preserving its arbitrary power and the privileges flowing from it, and denies society all freedom as a matter of self-preservation.

5. *Osvobozhdenie*, no. 20–21, April 18/May 1, 1903, p. 357.