

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A forerunner of Darwin in the service of nihilists: the translation and reception of *Vestiges* in Russia

Alexander V. Khramov^{1,2}

¹Borissiak Palaeontological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia and ²Cherepovets State University, Russia

Email: a-hramov@yandex.ru

Abstract

Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation by Robert Chambers, a Scottish publisher and popular writer, was one of the most influential evolutionary works in the pre-Darwinian age. This article examines the circumstances in which this treatise was published in Russia in 1863 and went through a second printing in 1868. *Vestiges* was translated into Russian by Alexander Palkhovsky (1831–1907), a former medical student, ideologically close to the nihilist movement, and was initially printed by the radical publisher Anatoly Cherenin, later prosecuted for his ties with revolutionary circles. *Vestiges* was translated not from the English original, but from a German translation by Karl Vogt. Given the popularity of German materialism among Russian radicals in the 1860s, association with Vogt's name did much to draw attention to the translation. Contrary to Vogt, who took an anti-evolutionary stance while translating *Vestiges*, Palkhovsky and other nihilists ardently supported evolution in the hope that it would help them combat religious belief. Praising the author of *Vestiges* for his evolutionary views, Russian radicals at the same time criticized him for numerous references to God, teleological thinking and blindness to social problems. In their attempts to put *Vestiges* into service, Russian nihilists were similar to English freethinkers of the 1840s. The study of how *Vestiges* was read and perceived in Russia provides a better understanding of the cross-cultural reception of evolutionary ideas on the eve of Darwin's *Origin of Species*.

Robert Chambers's bestseller *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, anonymously published in 1844, was for many on both sides of the Atlantic their first serious encounter with evolutionary ideas.¹ As a popular exposition of the 'development hypothesis', covering a variety of themes from planetary nebulae to the origins of civilization, this book did much to pave the way for Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859). As Milton Millhauser noted, *Vestiges* absorbed the roughest blows that might otherwise have fallen on Darwin's shoulders.² Indeed, Darwin observed anti-evolutionist attacks on *Vestiges* 'with fear and trembling', because he felt that he himself could have been their victim.³ Later, in a 'Historical sketch', added as a preface to the second edition of *Origin* (1860), Darwin was

¹ James A. Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception and Secret Authorship of the Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. As Secord points out (op. cit., p. 39), '*Vestiges* was the one book that all readers of the *Origin of Species* were assumed to have read'.

² Milton Millhauser, *Just before Darwin: Robert Chambers and "Vestiges"*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1959, pp. 5–6.

³ Joel S. Schwartz, 'Darwin, Wallace, and Huxley, and "Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation"', *Journal of the History of Biology* (1990) 23, pp. 127–53, 132.

forced to admit that *Vestiges* 'had done excellent service in this country [England] in calling attention to the subject'.⁴ *Vestiges* nonetheless should not be downgraded as just a bleak foreshadowing of Darwinism, for it was an evolutionary masterpiece on its own, proclaiming progressive evolution on a cosmic scale. The grand evolutionary vision of Chambers was closer to that of Henry Drummond or Teilhard de Chardin than to the humble inductions of Darwin. It is instructive that *Vestiges* continued to thrive in the English book market long after *Origin*, and was not decisively outnumbered in copies by the latter until the twentieth century.⁵

While *Vestiges* caused a stir in the Anglo-American world, it did not win wide acclaim in non-English-speaking countries, in contrast to Darwin's *Origin*, which was immediately recognized as a game-changing book by many European naturalists and intellectuals. However, *Vestiges* did not go unnoticed in continental Europe, being twice translated into German (1846, 1851), and once each into Dutch (1849), Italian (1860), Hungarian (1858) and Russian (1863).⁶ These translations were incorporated into very different ideological projects, which reflected the deep ambivalence of the original text.⁷ On the one hand, the author of *Vestiges* clearly sought to drive God out of the universe and replace miraculous divine interventions with purely naturalistic processes in explaining the appearance of new groups of organisms throughout Earth's history, as well as the origin of life, reason and language. On the other hand, evolution was described in *Vestiges* in a language full of religious awe, with numerous references to the Creator, who devised such a wonderful world capable of self-development. *Vestiges* was, in fact, anything but an atheistic pamphlet. It was more like an exercise in natural theology, though a natural theology that had been profoundly updated since Paley's time. It comes as no surprise, then, that the translation of *Vestiges* in Italy was undertaken by a liberal-minded Roman Catholic priest, Francesco Majocchi.⁸ Nor, since the first German and the Dutch translations of *Vestiges* were intended to serve a religious and conservative agenda, should it be surprising that it was atheist and radical materialist Karl Vogt who took the trouble to translate this book into German for the second time.⁹ And lastly, behind the Hungarian translation was an ex-revolutionary fighter and – in later life – active member of the Calvinist Church, József Somody.¹⁰

Whereas other European translations of *Vestiges* have received a good deal of scholarly attention, the same cannot be said of the Russian rendition. Not long ago even its very existence was denied, and there is still virtually no literature on the subject, either in English or in Russian, except an old paper by Soviet academician Boris Kozo-Polyansky, which gives almost no biographical details of the translator, Alexander Palkhovsky, and does not discuss the reception of *Vestiges* in Russian society.¹¹ This knowledge gap is especially concerning given that *Vestiges*, translated into Russian as *Natural History of the Universe (Estestvennaja istorija mirozdanija)*, was the first book on evolution that found its

⁴ Cited in Schwartz, op. cit. (3), p. 136.

⁵ Secord, op. cit. (1), p. 526.

⁶ János Podani and David A. Morrison, 'A concise bibliography and iconography of *Vestiges*, including an overlooked use of the tree icon', *Annals of the History and Philosophy of Biology* (2018) 23, pp. 55–79.

⁷ Nicolaas Rupke, 'Translation studies in the history of science: the example of *Vestiges*', *BJHS* (2000) 33, pp. 209–22.

⁸ Silvia Morlotti, 'Non rivoluzioni, ma evoluzioni: Francesco Majocchi, le scienze naturali e il progresso civile', *Storia in Lombardia* (2010) 35, pp. 5–35.

⁹ Rupke, op. cit. (7).

¹⁰ Katalin Straner, 'Science, translation and the public: the Hungarian reception of Darwinism, 1858–1875', PhD thesis, Budapest, 2012, pp. 80–112.

¹¹ Boris M. Kozo-Polyansky, 'A.M. Palkhovsky: zabytyy darvinist-shestidesyatnik' (A.M. Palkhovsky: the forgotten Darwinist of the sixties), *Priroda* (1951) 5, pp. 73–77. Rupke, op. cit. (7), p. 212, claimed that 'the book was not translated into French, Italian, Spanish, Russian or Swedish', while in fact Italian and Russian translations of *Vestiges* do exist.

way into the hands of Russian readers. The Russian translation of *Origin* made by Sergey Rachinsky did not appear until a year later, in 1864. What makes the Russian edition of *Vestiges* worth studying is not only its chronological priority, but also a preface and lengthy critical foot- and endnotes by Palkhovsky which constitute an independent text under the same cover as the original. Almost every translation is influenced by the translator's dispositions, but often in a subtle and non-apparent way. In the Russian edition of *Vestiges*, however, the direct voice of the translator is heard across the whole book. Palkhovsky takes every chance to express his opinion on what he deems important in the multifaceted narrative of *Vestiges* and does not shy away from arguing with it at times. One of his footnotes, for example, begins with the following accusation, framed as if the translator were in face-to-face conversation with the author: 'hey you, the venerable Englishman, you are missing the point all along'.¹² In contrast to some other translations of *Vestiges* (such as the Hungarian and the first German ones), which were accompanied neither by a preface nor by footnotes, the openly expressed attitude of the translator makes the Russian edition of this book a telling example of cross-cultural transfer of mid-Victorian popular science.

In this article, I will use previously unexamined archive sources to shed new light on Palkhovsky, and will analyse his views against the background of the Russian nihilist movement based on his commentaries on *Vestiges* as well as his other publications. I will also discuss Anatoly Fedorovich Cherenin, the first publisher of Palkhovsky's translation, who was linked to political radicalism. Together with an analysis of the responses to the book in contemporary periodicals this will place the translation of *Vestiges* in the political and cultural climate of the 1860s in Russia, a turbulent time of the Great Reforms and burgeoning revolutionary organizations. Unraveling how this 'Victorian sensation' was transplanted to Russian soil and what grew out of it will certainly add new facets to our understanding of the early history of the popularization of evolution in continental Europe. In particular, this case elucidates the role of radicals, who were driven by political aspirations rather than by an eagerness for science per se, in promoting evolutionary ideas.

Alexander Palkhovsky and scientific materialism

Alexander Mikhailovich Palkhovsky, a literary critic, translator and journal writer, was born to the family of a low-ranking military clerk on 13 June 1831 in Tambov, central Russia.¹³ His father, Mikhail Ivanovich Palkhovsky (born 1801) was a former officer, who resigned his military service at the rank of *praporshchik*, which granted hereditary nobility at the time, to become a government official in 1826. Mikhail Palkhovsky was employed at the various fiscal offices of provincial administrations of Ryazan and Tambov governorates until 1832, when he joined the civil personnel of the Ministry of War. There he was employed at the Tambov commissariat commission, a local division of the military supply department. In 1841 Mikhail Palkhovsky was appointed to the Stavropol commissariat commission, and one year later he was put in charge of the Temnolessky military temporary hospital deployed near Stavropol during the Caucasian War. Probably it was under his influence that Alexander chose medicine as his profession and, after graduating from the Stavropol gymnasium in 1852, enrolled at the Faculty of Medicine of Imperial Moscow University. Palkhovsky's family was apparently short of money, since he boarded and studied at the university at public expense. Palkhovsky

¹² [Robert Chambers], *Estestvennaja istorija mirozdaniija* (The Natural History of the Universe), tr. Alexander Palkhovsky, Moscow: Cherenin A., Ushakov A., 1863, p. 337.

¹³ The Central State Archive of the City of Moscow: Fond 2125, Opis 3, Delo 7, p. 140.

was funded by the state programme for children of native Caucasians and Russian officials in Caucasus Krai. In return for state-sponsored higher education, after graduation the beneficiaries of the programme were obliged to enter the civil service in the Caucasian provinces. Instead, Palkhovskiy quit the university without a degree in 1858 to become a man of letters.¹⁴

When still a student, Palkhovskiy wrote entries for the column entitled ‘Medical letters’ in the short-lived magazine *Obshchezanimatelny Vestnik* (1857–8), in which he discussed problems of natural-science education and also published some articles on various scientific topics such as electricity and atmospheric gases. Soon thereafter Palkhovskiy turned to literary criticism, reviewing *Oblomov* (1859) by Ivan Goncharov, *The Storm* (1859) by Alexander Ostrovsky and other pieces of Russian fiction of the time for *Moskovskiy Vestnik* (1859–61) and similar Moscow-based magazines. Palkhovskiy also wrote much on the emancipation of women, an issue which was actively debated in Russia in the 1860s, taking the reductionist biologizing stance typical of so-called ‘vulgar’ or scientific materialists.¹⁵ Palkhovskiy openly declared that ‘a human being is foremost an animal, an organism’.¹⁶ In keeping with this principle, Palkhovskiy considered insect colonies, where reproductive and worker castes are separated, as a normative model for human society, when discussing the pros and cons of women’s employment.¹⁷ In general, Palkhovskiy expressed unreserved faith in the progressive potential of natural sciences: ‘Popularization of physiology is probably the most urgent need for modern society ... Science and enlightenment are all that matters. It is our only hope. It is the only force that could accomplish all beneficial changes’.¹⁸

A similar preoccupation with natural sciences was shared by other radical intellectuals of the 1860s like Nikolay Chernyshevsky, Dmitry Pisarev and Varfolomey Zaytsev, who wrote on Pushkin and Darwin with equal ease, invariably upholding utilitarian considerations above ethics and aesthetics. Like Pisarev, the leading figure of Russian nihilism, Palkhovskiy was formally a nobleman by birth, but de facto was a member of the *raznochintsy* intelligentsia, consisting of the educated sons of the bureaucracy, bourgeoisie, clergy and peasantry, who invaded the intellectual field in the 1860s after its domination by the wealthy landowning nobility in previous decades.¹⁹ *Raznochintsy*, especially those from the student youth, were a social group that fuelled the nihilist revolutionary movement. Because the radicals of low social origin considered dissemination of scientific knowledge mixed with materialism an all-important tool of social liberation, they held a background in natural sciences in high esteem. It is not accidental that the self-proclaimed nihilist Bazarov, an iconic fictional character of Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* (1862), the novel that gave currency to the word ‘nihilism’, was depicted as a student of the Faculty of Medicine.²⁰ It is noteworthy that Palkhovskiy’s biography perfectly fits

¹⁴ The Central State Archive of the City of Moscow, Fond 418, Opis 21, Delo 381; Fond 418, Opis 274, Delo 70; Fond 418, Opis 275, Delo 28.

¹⁵ Frederick Gregory, *Scientific Materialism in Nineteenth Century Germany*, Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1977.

¹⁶ Alexander Palkhovskiy, ‘Eshche raz o zhenskom trude: po povodu zhurnalnykh tolkov ob etom voprose’ (Once more on the woman labor: with regard to the discussion on this issue in the journals), *Ateney* (1858) 5–6, pp. 487–503, 490.

¹⁷ Palkhovskiy, op. cit. (16).

¹⁸ Palkhovskiy in Amédée Guillemin, *Miry populjarnaya astronomiya* (The Worlds: Popular Astronomy), tr. Alexander Palkhovskiy, Moscow: Grachev, 1866, p. 13.

¹⁹ Christopher Becker, ‘Raznochintsy: the development of the word and of the concept’, *American Slavic and East European Review*, 1959, pp. 63–74.

²⁰ Kristian Petrov, ‘“Strike out, right and left!” a conceptual-historical analysis of 1860s Russian nihilism and its notion of negation’, *Studies in East European Thought* (2019) 71, pp. 73–97.

that of Bazarov, who is presented in the novel as a son of a provincial regimental doctor. Zaytsev, who with Pisarev wrote for *Russkoe slovo*, one of the most influential radical periodicals of the 1860s, also studied at the Faculty of Medicine of Moscow University and, like Palkhovskiy, left it in 1862 without graduating.

Soaked with scientism and anti-religious feelings, the Russian radicalized youth were deeply enthusiastic about German scientific materialism. This fact did not escape the notice of Russian novelists. Turgenev's Bazarov is eager to recommend *Kraft und Stoff* by Ludwig Büchner, and one nihilist described in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* even worshiped volumes of Büchner, Karl Vogt and Jacob Moleschott after the manner of religious icons, burning church candles before them. Dostoevsky's description is hardly an exaggeration, as is evidenced by Zaytsev, who recollected in exile that he had been ready to suffer martyrdom for the ideas of Moleschott and, notably, of Darwin.²¹ Less ideological naturalists were often overshadowed in the eyes of the Russian public by the fame of German materialists. As Palkhovskiy put it, 'readers would devour books by Moleschott and Vogt, because they are long familiar with the names of these scientists, and would pass Huxley's and Lyell's works by, because these naturalists are still little talked about'.²² Riding this wave of interest in German materialists, Palkhovskiy translated *Physiologisches Skizzenbuch* by Moleschott into Russian in 1863, the very same year as his translation of *Vestiges* appeared. It was no coincidence that both translations were issued by the same publisher, Anatoly Cherenin, since they were both part of the same ideological enterprise, aimed at importing the materialistic world view into the religion-ridden Russian society. If it were not for Karl Vogt, the book by an anonymous English author would have gone almost unnoticed in Russia. Because Vogt had translated *Vestiges* into German, Palkhovskiy decided that it was worth translating into Russian too. Unlike other European translators, however, Palkhovskiy translated *Vestiges* not from the English original, but from the German translation of Vogt, not least because that would enable him to use the name of this radical idol for the promotion of the book.

The indirect translation of *Vestiges*: a marketing strategy with political overtones

Vogt translated the sixth English edition of *Vestiges* shortly before the March Revolution of 1848, but social unrest delayed its publication until 1851. Palkhovskiy used the second edition of Vogt's translation, which appeared in 1858. In the preface Palkhovskiy made an attempt to justify his decision not to use the English text by saying that Vogt's translation was 'far superior in literary quality' to the original.²³ This excuse seems rather far-fetched because Palkhovskiy confessed in one of the footnotes that he had not even read the book before he started to translate it.²⁴ It is more likely that Palkhovskiy simply was not proficient enough in English (knowledge of French and German was much more widespread among educated Russians) or did not have access to the original. In any case, the fact that Palkhovskiy translated from the German version provided him with the pretext for printing Vogt's name in bold letters on the title page of the Russian edition of *Vestiges* (Figure 1). This was a clever marketing ploy to draw readers' attention to the book under the umbrella of fashionable German materialism. According to the booksellers' catalogues, the Russian edition of *Vestiges* was sold alongside fresh Russian translations

²¹ Feodor Kuznetsov, *Publitsisty 1860-kh godov: krug 'Russkogo slova'* (Journal Authors of the 1860s: The Circle of the 'Russian Word'), Moscow: Molodaya gvardiya, 1981, p. 188.

²² Alexander Palkhovskiy, 'O knigakh po estestvennym naukam za proshliyi i nyneshniyi god' (Review of the natural-science books of this and past years), *Knizhnik* (1865) 2, pp. 115–25, 119.

²³ Palkhovskiy in [Chambers], op. cit. (12), p. xiii.

²⁴ Palkhovskiy in [Chambers], op. cit. (12), p. 293.



Figure 1. Title pages of the first (1863) and second (1868) Russian editions of *Vestiges*, translated by Alexander Palkhovskiy.

of *Lehre der Nahrungsmittel* (1863) by Moleschott, *Physiologische Briefe* (1863) by Vogt and other works of scientific materialists in a bookshop run by revolutionary Nikolai Serno-Solovyevich in St Petersburg.²⁵ Because the title page of Palkhovskiy's translation contained no references to the anonymous English writer, some inattentive readers even mistook Vogt for the author of the book, as Fedor Reshetnikov, one of the *raznochintsy* writers, did in an entry in his diary dated the summer of 1864.²⁶

Palkhovskiy's footnotes to *Vestiges* echoed the strict empiricism of German materialists. According to him, 'in the present time rational minds hold as an indisputable truth that knowledge in any sphere could be obtained only by observation, experience and induction. Only idiots could talk about ideas independent of experience'.²⁷ Büchner, for example, argued exactly the same thing, believing that even mathematical concepts are empirically rooted. The person, he wrote in *Kraft und Stoff*, 'achieves all its thinking and knowledge only from observing the objective world around it'.²⁸ Or, as summed up by Turgenev's Bazarov, 'there are no principles at all, it is only sensations that exist'. Under the spell of this naive realism Palkhovskiy recognized the reductionist programme

²⁵ I.E. Barenbaum and E. Barykin Vladimir, 'Revoliutsionno-demokraticheskie i progressivnye izdatelstva, tipografii i knizhnye magaziny v 1850–1870-kh gg.' (Revolutionary, democratic and progressive publishing houses, printing offices and bookshops during the 1850s–1870s), in Irina I. Frolova (ed.), *Kniga v Rossii: 1861–1881* (The Book in Russia: 1861–1881), Moscow: Kniga, 1988, pp. 86–155.

²⁶ Fedor M. Reshetnikov, *Yunosheskie proizvedeniia. Otryvki iz dnevnika. Pisma. Polnoe sobranie sochineniy* (Early Works. Excerpts from the Diary. Letters. Complete Works), vol. 6, Sverdlovsk: OGIZ, 1948, p. 275.

²⁷ Palkhovskiy in [Chambers], op. cit. (12), p. 317.

²⁸ Quoted in Gregory, op. cit. (15), p. 113.

as self-evident and prophesied that in the future all social sciences would be based on anthropology, 'whose contents are derived from observing man as natural phenomena'.²⁹ The author of *Vestiges* himself gave some ground for this conclusion, discussing the laws of social statistics outlined by the Belgian mathematician and criminologist Adolphe Quetelet. When *Vestiges* claimed that 'mental action, being proved to be under law, passes at once into the category of natural things', it definitely appealed to the materialistic-minded Russian radicals.³⁰ The reductionist mood of the book was noticed in the anonymous review of Palkhovsky's translation which was probably written by Yevgeny Edelson and published in the popular periodical *Biblioteka dlya chteniya*: 'the author [of *Vestiges*] is trying, and not without success, to unambiguously link all so-called human "spiritual qualities" to the general history of the material development of Earth'.³¹

Palkhovsky frequently used footnotes for digressions on political issues, which of course had to be managed within the limitations placed by censorship. For instance, the crime statistics discussed in *Vestiges* gave Palkhovsky a pretext to call for a thoroughgoing reform of the criminal-justice and penal system. He reasoned that if there are regular patterns in criminal activity, it is the social environment and not individuals that should be blamed for crimes. It follows, Palkhovsky said, that the science of criminal law has to 'find out what social conditions would make the commission of crimes naturally impossible' – a suggestion that could be deciphered as a disguised call for a radical change of the politico-economic system.³² According to Palkhovsky's utopian ideals, penal policy should be transformed into a kind of 'moral therapy' designed not to punish but to cure.³³ His stance was met with full approval by nihilist journalist Zaytsev, who remarked in the review of Palkhovsky's translation for the radical magazine *Russkoe slovo* that 'punishing someone for a crime is like punishing someone for stumbling and falling'.³⁴

Nonetheless, the discourse of *Vestiges* in general seemed overly optimistic and too politically passive for the Russian radicals. In their opinion, the author placed too much trust in inevitable progress, which would lead to the development of 'higher types of humanity' in the distant future – a weak consolation for those suffering poverty and hunger now. Commenting on the evolutionary theodicy offered by *Vestiges*, Palkhovsky accused its author of being too concerned with natural evil, about which nothing could be done: 'you would better tell us about social evil, for example, about your famous English proletariat – teach us how to eradicate this evil. The problem is that when it comes to this question every liberal benevolent-looking Englishman keeps his mouth shut'.³⁵ Prevented by censorship from discussing tsarist autocracy and the miserable state of the Russian *narod* (lower classes), Palkhovsky diverted his anger to the English establishment, questioning in a Chartist-like manner why the working classes were still not represented in the English parliament.³⁶ Palkhovsky was not alone in criticizing *Vestiges* for blindness to social injustice. Later a fictional story was published in the satirical magazine *Iskra*, accusing the book translated by Palkhovsky of downplaying thousands of years of human sufferings, which 'compared to eternity are like a drop compared to the ocean'

²⁹ Palkhovsky in [Chambers], op. cit. (12), p. xii.

³⁰ [Robert Chambers] *Vestiges of Natural History of Creation*, London: John Churchill, 1847, p. 239.

³¹ [Evgeny N. Edelson], 'Estestvennaja istorija mirozdanija' (The natural history of the universe), *Biblioteka dlya chteniya* (1863), 10, pp. 56–61, 61.

³² Palkhovsky in [Chambers], op. cit. (12), p. 295.

³³ Palkhovsky in [Chambers], op. cit. (12), p. 296.

³⁴ [V. Zaytsev] 'Estestvennaja istorija mirozdanija' (The natural history of the universe), *Russkoe slovo* (1863) 5, pp. 62–74, 73.

³⁵ Palkhovsky in [Chambers], op. cit. (12), p. 334.

³⁶ Palkhovsky in [Chambers], op. cit. (12), p. 334.

in the providential perspective. According to the story's plot, such an optimistic *Vestiges*-inspired reasoning enabled a complacent character to reassure himself when faced with an indigent and desperate young mother and her crying baby.³⁷

Tackling the religion of *Vestiges*

Needless to say, the religious overtones of *Vestiges* were welcomed neither by Vogt nor by the Russian nihilists. However, theistic assumptions were an essential part of Chambers's evolutionary scheme, not mere rhetoric disguising godless naturalism, as was sometimes assumed. Although it is often overlooked, the author of *Vestiges* is not just another pre-Darwinian evolutionist. Instead, he should be recognized as a founder of theistic evolutionism, an approach which is still exceedingly popular within Western theology. It was Chambers who laid the ground for understanding evolution as a means by which God creates the universe and all living things ('creation by law', in his words). Many of the early supporters of theistic evolution, like the Oxford mathematician Rev. Baden Powell and English naturalists William Carpenter and Alfred Russel Wallace, were sympathetic readers of *Vestiges*.³⁸ Chambers was not content with the distant God of deism, but stressed instead that God 'must be continually present in every part' of evolving creation.³⁹ In Chambers's view, God is not a bystander, but had preordained the course of evolution to provide a final redress for evil.⁴⁰ In short, Chambers anticipated the main themes occurring in the writings of many subsequent theistic evolutionists up to such recent writers as Jürgen Moltmann and John Polkinghorne. Unbelievers of radical stripe found this very hard to stomach.

Vogt uncompromisingly expressed his atheist creed in several footnotes to the German edition, maintaining that 'every notion of transcendent God or Lawmaker leads to absurd conclusions'.⁴¹ However, contrary to Podani and Morrison, who argue that all the comments and footnotes by Vogt found their way into the Russian edition, in fact all of Vogt's anti-religious invectives had been dropped from it.⁴² No doubt this was a deliberate omission caused by censorship considerations, because Palkhovsky accurately translated all of Vogt's other footnotes on scientific matters, including those with which he strictly disagreed. Despite this, Palkhovsky made an attempt to neutralize religious passages of *Vestiges* (to his honour, he refrained from cutting them out of the translation) in his own more cautiously worded comments. Palkhovsky castigated those 'who are unfamiliar with the essence of the natural phenomena and not used to strict philosophical reasoning' for assuming that 'there is a force in nature capable of consciously acting on purpose'.⁴³ He clearly declared that any attempts to find 'design and purpose in nature' are a result of self-deceit. At low stages of intellectual development, Palkhovsky claimed, people believed

³⁷ Unknown author, 'Putevye vpechatleniya Ivana Dobronravova' (Travel impressions of Ivan Dobronravov), *Iskra* (1866) 30, pp. 395–400.

³⁸ Baden Powell, *Essays on the Spirit of the Inductive Philosophy, the Unity of Worlds and the Philosophy of Creation*, London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1855, p. 484; William B. Carpenter, *Nature and Man: Essays Scientific and Philosophical*, New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1889, p. 413; Schwartz, op. cit. (3).

³⁹ [Chambers], op. cit. (30), p. 272.

⁴⁰ [Chambers], op. cit. (30), p. 273.

⁴¹ [Robert Chambers] *Natürliche Geschichte der Schöpfung des Weltalls, der Erde und der auf ihr befindlichen Organismen, begründet auf die durch die Wissenschaft errungenen Thatsachen*, tr. Karl Vogt, Braunschweig: Friedrich Vieweg und Sohn, 1858, p. 240.

⁴² Podani and Morrison, op. cit. (6), p. 60, incorrectly state that 'Palkhovsky used the 1858 German edition printed in Braunschweig, including all of the footnotes and comments added by Vogt' (italics mine). See anti-religious footnotes by Vogt dropped from the Russian edition of *Vestiges* in [Chambers], op. cit. (41), pp. 10, 140, 144, 240, 260, 261 and 276.

⁴³ Palkhovsky in [Chambers], op. cit. (12), p. 141.

that 'nature is inhabited by beings similar to them but invisible – spirits that govern over it', but by now these 'childish notions' have been left behind.⁴⁴ Without openly attacking religion, in this way Palkhovsky made clear his disdain for it.

In his review of Palkhovsky's translation, Zaytsev also spared no effort in dismantling the religious component of *Vestiges*. Zaytsev blamed the author of the book for a lack of courage and insincerity because of his attempts to distance himself from materialism and dress evolution in religious clothes. 'To what a degree of naivety and hypocrisy the author has been drawn by his desire to earn the favourable opinion of the venerable English clergy and all the bigots of the United Kingdom', Zaytsev exclaimed.⁴⁵ Vogt's footnotes, omitted from the Russian edition, argued in a similar vein, asking whether 'the author implies the existence of the eternal spirit only to mitigate theologians?'⁴⁶ Opponents of nihilists from the religious camp likewise raised doubts about the sincerity of the *Vestiges* author. Viktor Kudriavtsev-Platonov, Eastern Orthodox theologian and professor at the Moscow Theological Academy, pointed out that

the author of *Natural History of the Universe* [the title given to *Vestiges* in Russian translation] expatiates, both appropriately and inappropriately, on God, Providence, the wisdom and goodness of Divine plans, etc., throughout his book, although the whole course of his researches betrays a strong desire to banish all that is supernatural and truly Divine from the history of the universe.⁴⁷

A clear parallel could be seen in controversies surrounding *Vestiges* in England, where many readers from both camps also dismissed references to the 'Eternal One' made by its author as 'meaningless conventions, tacked on to placate the saints'.⁴⁸

The appeal of *Vestiges* to nihilists: evolution and spontaneous generation

So what, after all, attracted the Russian radicals to *Vestiges*, despite its seemingly compromising and indecisive tone? It was the masterful presentation of the development hypothesis. However, Palkhovsky and his fellow nihilists differed in this matter from their beloved Vogt. Curiously enough, Vogt was a staunch supporter of the immutability of species while preparing the translation of *Vestiges*. Before he was converted to evolutionism by Darwin's *Origin*, Vogt supported a rather whimsical autochthonous generation theory, which holds that the new species sprang from the earth under unknown physical conditions at the beginning of each new geological age, like warriors from the dragon's teeth in the myth of the Argonauts.⁴⁹ In consequence, Vogt furnished his translation of *Vestiges* with numerous anti-evolutionary footnotes, which asserted that no species ever turned into another and that complex organisms periodically went extinct to emerge anew after geological cataclysms.⁵⁰ But Palkhovsky sided with the author of *Vestiges* in this regard and decided to counterbalance Vogt's anti-evolutionary comments (translated by him along with the original text, despite disagreement) with his own footnotes, where he defended the idea of evolution. In doing so Palkhovsky often appealed to the authority of Darwin: 'the remark by Vogt, as well as the whole doctrine of immutability of species,

⁴⁴ Palkhovsky in [Chambers], op. cit. (12), p. 142.

⁴⁵ [Zaytsev], op. cit. (34), p. 66.

⁴⁶ Vogt in [Chambers], op. cit. (41), p. 276.

⁴⁷ Victor D. Kudriavtsev-Platonov (1883), *O proiskhozhdenii organicheskikh sushchestv* (On the origin of organic species). Moscow: Lavrov M.N. and Co., 1883, p. 89.

⁴⁸ Secord, op. cit. (1), p. 314.

⁴⁹ Nicolaas Rupke, 'Neither creation nor evolution: the third way in mid-nineteenth century thinking about the origin of species', *Annals of the History and Philosophy of Biology* (2005) 10, p. 143–172.

⁵⁰ Vogt in [Chambers], op. cit. (41), p. 138.

lost their significance with the appearance of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*.⁵¹ It is important to note that, although *Origin* had not yet been published in Russia, the author of *Vestiges* was, for Palkhovsky, first of all a forerunner of Darwin. In the preface to his translation Palkhovsky advertised *Vestiges* as the first (after Lamarck's 'failed attempts') 'more or less scientific' solution to the problem of the origin of species, 'agreeing in the main points with Darwin's theory, which is in the first place in science now'.⁵²

Zaytsev, in his review of the translation of *Vestiges*, wholeheartedly supported evolutionism, dismissing Vogt's criticism as 'nonsense' and, like Palkhovsky, invoking Darwin's name: 'fortunately, nobody could think after Darwin that species of organisms are immutable and absolute'.⁵³ Edelson in *Biblioteka dlya chteniya* also perceived *Vestiges* as a prelude to Darwinism: 'how clever is the author of the English book is clear from the fact that he anticipated Darwin's theory of the mutability of organic species that made so much noise in recent times'.⁵⁴ However, Palkhovsky himself showed sympathy for evolutionism even on the eve of Darwin's *Origin*, as is evident from his article of 1858 dealing with electricity and atmospheric gases. As the article explained, it is not enough to simply describe electrical phenomena, since the main task of science is to determine their underlying causes such as the motion of atoms. Palkhovsky illustrated his point with an example taken from comparative morphology, saying that a full understanding of the distinctive characters of any particular group of organisms is impossible without knowledge of their evolutionary origin:

Insects could not have appeared before simpler organized organisms. In other words, insects could not have appeared before annelid animals. Hence, a producing cause of insects is an annelid animal. Then, to define what an insect is I should figure out how and by what ways an annelid animal mutated into an insect.⁵⁵

Palkhovsky also concurred with *Vestiges* in accepting the theory of spontaneous generation. To persuade readers that the transition from inorganic matter to life could have happened without any interference on the part of God, *Vestiges* argued that not only animalcules, but even mites, could be produced from scratch, referring to the notorious electrochemical experiments of Andrew Crosse. While Vogt in his footnotes refuted the credibility of Crosse's experiments, Palkhovsky insisted that the question of the spontaneous generation of 'the simplest forms of animal and plant kingdoms' was still on the table.⁵⁶ Palkhovsky strongly criticized Louis Pasteur and the French Academy of Sciences, which in 1862 had awarded Pasteur the Alhumbert Prize for disproving the theory of spontaneous generation. According to Palkhovsky, Pasteur and the like were 'bad philosophers' who 'cannot even properly formulate the problem'.⁵⁷ He prophesied that chemists eventually would create *in vitro* 'the simplest zoological forms' just as they had previously synthesized some organic molecules.⁵⁸ It is suggestive that Pisarev, the golden pen of Russian nihilism, likewise took the side of Félix Pouchet, a leading French advocate of the idea of the spontaneous generation against Pasteur and the

⁵¹ Palkhovsky in [Chambers], op. cit. (12), p. 170.

⁵² Palkhovsky in [Chambers], op. cit. (12), p. xii.

⁵³ [Zaytsev], op. cit. (34), p. 72.

⁵⁴ [Edelson], op. cit. (31), p. 59.

⁵⁵ Alexander Palkhovsky, 'Ozon' (Ozone), *Obshchezanimatelny Vestnik* (1858) 11, pp. 510–17, 512.

⁵⁶ Palkhovsky in [Chambers], op. cit. (12), p. 136.

⁵⁷ Palkhovsky in [Chambers], op. cit. (12), p. 365.

⁵⁸ Palkhovsky in [Chambers], op. cit. (12), p. 365.

Parisian academy.⁵⁹ Evidently, Russian radicals viewed the theory of spontaneous generation as an essential part of the materialist doctrine, since it filled a breach where religion might potentially encroach into an otherwise impregnable naturalistic world view. *Vestiges* was regarded as an ally in this struggle.

The second Russian edition of *Vestiges* in the wake of the assassination attempt on the tsar

After 1863, when Cherenin published his translations of *Vestiges* and Moleschott's *Physiologisches Skizzenbuch*, Palkhovsky continued to stay in close touch with him. In 1865 Cherenin launched the book review magazine *Knizhnik*, and Palkhovsky started to contribute reviews of new books on natural sciences. As with other aspects of Cherenin's publishing activities, *Knizhnik* was marked by radicalism and popularized works by French socialist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, one of which, *La guerre et la paix*, was published by Cherenin in 1864 in Russian translation.⁶⁰ Soon afterwards, however, an attempt on the life of Tsar Alexander II, made by the revolutionary Dmitry Karakozov in the Summer Garden in Saint Petersburg on 4 April 1866, put an end to all Cherenin's businesses. The first public attempt to murder a tsar in Russian history, this attack deeply shook Russian society and unleashed state repression against radicals.⁶¹ Cherenin was one of the dozens of people personally affected by the political reaction to Karakozov's attempt. The police investigation revealed that the bookshop with a subscription library run by Cherenin in the centre of Moscow was frequented by members of Nikolai Ishutin's circle, a revolutionary group that maintained close contacts with Karakozov, Ishutin's cousin. As a result, the police searched Cherenin's private flat and bookshop on 5 August 1866. It is suggestive that excerpts from Büchner's *Kraft und Stoff* translated into Russian by revolutionary Petr Zaichnevsky were among other suspicious materials seized by police in Cherenin's properties. Predictably, *Knizhnik* and others of Cherenin's publishing projects ceased to exist in 1866, and his bookshop with the subscription library was finally closed by the edict of the minister of internal affairs on 18 June 1867. Three months later, on 13 September 1867, Cherenin was arrested and exiled to Pensa under a lifelong prohibition on bookselling and publishing imposed on him by a direct decree of Alexander II.⁶²

Palkhovsky's translation of *Vestiges*, however, outlived this political disaster and was republished by Vladimir Gautier, a large-scale publisher and book salesman, not engaged in politics, who kept a shop on Rozhdestvenka Street in the same rental house of Torletsky's where Cherenin's shop used to be quartered. The second Russian edition of *Vestiges* lacked Palkhovsky's preface and some of his footnotes but was embellished with black-and-white illustrations, mostly on palaeontological subjects, taken from

⁵⁹ Dmitry Pisarev, 'Podvigi evropeyskikh avtoritetov' (Feats of the European authoritative scientists), *Russkoe slovo* (1865) 6, pp. 165–86. The Russian radicals were by no means alone in bringing politics into the issue of spontaneous generation. Pasteur himself viewed his experiments aimed at disproving spontaneous generation and abiogenesis as a means to buttress Catholic religion and the conservative agenda of the Second Empire. See John Farley, 'The social, political, and religious background to the work of Louis Pasteur', *Annual Review of Microbiology* (1978) 32, pp. 143–54; Gerald L. Geison, *The Private Science of Louis Pasteur*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995, pp. 121–42.

⁶⁰ Iosif E. Barenbaum, 'A.F. Cherenin i ego zhurnal "Knizhnik" (k istorii demokraticeskogo knizhnogo dela vtoroi poloviny XIX veka)' (A.F. Cherenin and his journal "Booklover" (to the history of democratic publishing business of the second half of the 19th century)), *Kniga: Issledovaniia i materialy* (1969) 19, pp. 94–113.

⁶¹ Claudia Verhoeven, *The Odd Man Karakozov: Imperial Russia, Modernity, and the Birth of Terrorism*, Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2009.

⁶² Lydia D. Polinovskaya, 'A.F. Cherenin (1826–1892) i ego knigoprodavcheskaya i izdatelskaya deyatelnost' (A.F. Cherenin (1826–1892) and his bookselling and publishing business), PhD thesis, Moscow, 1989.



Figure 2. Illustrated pages from the second Russian edition of *Vestiges*.

Vogt's translation (Figure 2). In contrast, Cherenin's edition contained no illustrative materials, except for the schematic embryological–phylogenetic tree devised by Chambers.⁶³ A parallel could be traced here with the English editions of *Vestiges*, which initially also had no illustrations until the tenth edition (1853). After this point, further issues were released richly illustrated, which prolonged the survival of the book in the niche of popular literature in the shade of more solid and up-to-date scientific volumes. The same could be said of *Vestiges* in Russia since it was reissued in 1868 despite the fact that Darwin's *Origin* had appeared in Russian twice by that time (in 1864 and 1865). As a commercial publisher sensitive to public fashion, Gautier felt that *Vestiges* was still in demand and would serve as a kind of popular encyclopedia for a wide audience.

Nevertheless, the turmoil related to Karakozov's attempt had a significant impact on Palkovsky's career.⁶⁴ Having prepared other translations of popular-science books in the mid-1860s, Palkovsky then ceased his literary activity in 1868 to become a solicitor in the Moscow commercial court.⁶⁵ In his new position Palkovsky still showed an interest in radical politics, as is clear from his involvement in the trial of the Nechaevists in 1871. Nechaevists were the followers of the revolutionary, nihilist and conspirator Sergey Nechaev, famously fictionalized in Dostoevsky's novel *The Possessed*. Nechaev was a close friend of journalist Filipp Nefyodov, who was editor-in-chief of Cherenin's *Knizhnik*, to which Palkovsky had contributed as an author. In 1865, the very time

⁶³ [Chambers], op. cit. (12), p. 156.

⁶⁴ The following books appeared in Palkovsky's translation after the publication of the Russian edition of *Vestiges*: *Les mondes* by Amédée Guillemin (1866), *Le sommeil et les rêves* by Louis Maury (1867) and *Aus Amerika* by Rudolf Dulon (1868).

⁶⁵ The Central State Archive of the City of Moscow, Fond 78, Opis 12, Delo 240.

when Palkhovskiy actively wrote for *Knizhnik*, Nechaev lodged with Nefyodov during his visit to Moscow, so it cannot be excluded that Palkhovskiy met Nechaev in person.⁶⁶ Anyway, Palkhovskiy's involvement in the trial of the Nechaevists on the defence side of the courtroom does not seem unexpected. Palkhovskiy defended the revolutionary Alexander Buturlin, who was acquitted at that time but arrested again in 1879 on suspicion of a terrorist act aimed at the tsar's train. As a solicitor and a member of the Moscow Jurisprudence Society, Palkhovskiy published several books on legal issues in the 1870s, but never resumed translating natural-science books. He died on 14 July 1907 and was buried in the local cemetery in Nikolskoye-Shipilovo village in the vicinity of Moscow.⁶⁷

Conclusion

The intermingling of political radicalism and evolutionary ideas is well documented for Regency and early Victorian England.⁶⁸ As the present paper shows, the politics of evolution had strong revolutionary connotations in Russia also just before the arrival of Darwin's *Origin*. Nihilists could not afford to miss any opportunity to disseminate evolutionism in hope of undermining the religious fabric of society, and that is why they translated and published *Vestiges* in Russia. In making *Vestiges* serve their cause, Russian radicals faced the same problem as their British counterparts – a deep ambiguity of Chambers's text, balancing between naturalistic materialism and religion. While the evolutionary narrative of *Vestiges* was met with enthusiasm by English freethinkers, they felt uneasy about its godly language. On the one hand, *Vestiges* was lectured on by anti-religious political activists, such as George Jacob Holyoake, editor of the atheistic weekly *Oracle of Reason*, and Emma Martin, an Owenite socialist and feminist.⁶⁹ On the other hand, the numerous references to God in *Vestiges* flew in the face of those who hoped to draw anti-religious conclusions from evolution. At a public debate, an evangelical minister confronted Holyoake with the fact that the author of *Vestiges* accepted the divine origin of nature's laws.⁷⁰ So William Chilton, who initially favourably reviewed *Vestiges* for free-thought weekly *Movement*, edited by Holyoake, conceded later that 'the author of the "Vestiges" is no materialist. He looks through matter up to matter's god; he is, in fact, a "pure Theist"'.⁷¹

Despite the different contexts, Russian radicals reacted to *Vestiges* in a similar way, trying to appropriate its evolutionary content and simultaneously distancing themselves from its religious allusions. Being a moderate liberal, Chambers could hardly have imagined that his book would be exploited by revolutionary circles to subvert the political order in distant Russia. This case is another illustration that evolutionary thinking was politically charged even before Darwinism, with all its ramifications, came on the scene. It is not unexpected, then, that the theory of Darwin, like that of Chambers, was disseminated in Russia in the 1860s through the medium of nihilists. Many radical writers, such as Pisarev, Zaytsev, Maxim Antonovich and Nicolai Nozhin (the last was closely connected to Ishutin's circle) rushed to popularize Darwinism after *Origin* was translated into

⁶⁶ Felix M. Lurie, *Nechaev: Sozidatel razrusheniia* (Nechaev: Creator of Destruction), Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya, 2001, p. 39.

⁶⁷ The Central State Archive of the City of Moscow, Fond 203, Opis 780, Delo 3530, p. 241.

⁶⁸ Adrian Desmond, *The Politics of Evolution: Morphology, Medicine, and Reform in Radical London*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989.

⁶⁹ Secord, op. cit. (1), pp. 310–16.

⁷⁰ Secord, op. cit. (1), p. 314.

⁷¹ William Chilton, "Materialism" and the author of "Vestiges", *The Reasoner* (1846) 1, pp. 7–8, 7.

Russian in 1864.⁷² The Russian translation of *Vestiges* was part of the same story of welcoming evolution as an ideology intended to serve political purposes and not just as ‘pure’ and ‘disinterested’ science.

Acknowledgements. The research was supported by RFBR grant 21-011-44042. The author thanks the two anonymous reviewers whose suggestions helped to improve the style and content of the paper. This paper is a reworked version of a paper by the author published in Russian in *Studies in the History of Biology* (2021) 13, pp. 28–56.

⁷² James A. Rogers, ‘Russia: social sciences’, in Thomas F. Glick (ed.), *The Comparative Reception of Darwinism*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988, pp. 256–68.

Cite this article: Khramov AV (2023). A forerunner of Darwin in the service of nihilists: the translation and reception of *Vestiges* in Russia. *The British Journal for the History of Science* 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007087423000900>

Appendix: translations of *Vestiges* into European languages

Language	Translator	Title in translation	Publication dates	Edition of <i>Vestiges</i> used for translation
German	Adolf Friedrich Seubert (1819–90)	<i>Spuren der Gottheit in der Entwicklungs- und Bildungsgeschichte der Schöpfung</i>	1846	3rd (1845)
German	Karl Vogt (1817–95)	<i>Natürliche Geschichte der Schöpfung des Weltalls, der Erde und der auf ihr befindlichen Organismen, begründet auf die durch die Wissenschaft errungenen Thatsachen</i>	1851, 1858	6th (1847)
Dutch	Jan Hubert van den Broek (1815–96)	<i>Sporen van de natuurlijke geschiedenis der schepping, of schepping en voortgaande ontwikkeling van planten en dieren, onder den invloed en het beheer der natuurwetten</i>	1849, 1850, 1854, 1866	6th (1847)
Italian	Francesco Majocchi (1820–65)	<i>Storia Naturale della Creazione</i>	1860	3rd (1845)
Hungarian	József Somody (1825–97)	<i>A teremtés természet-történelmének nyomai</i>	1858, 1861	10th (1853)
Russian	Alexander Palkhovsky (1831–1907)	<i>Estestvennaja istorija mirozdanija</i>	1863, 1868	6th (1847) in German translation by K. Vogt (1858)