

RUSSIAN SOCIETY OF THE 30s-40s
AND IDEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS
OF V. S. PECHORIN

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The 30s-40s of the 19th century played the major part in the development of Russian spiritual culture — since at that time Russian intelligentsia expressed itself in words and ideas under oppressive conditions of the lack of freedom. That was the period of «exterior slavery and interior liberation». These words pronounced by Alexander Ivanovich Gertsen splendidly reflect one of the major oppositions characteristic of the historical existence in the 2nd quarter of the 19th century.

Unable to accomplish social work under the despotic conditions of Nicholas II, the most progressive of the young nobles adopted the ideas of French Romanticism, Schiller, who had become their idol, symbolizing «loftiest and most wonderful spirits» and of German philosophy — Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, who had been treated as «Russian» philosophers. As a result, the entire activity of the cultural layer in Russian nobility was concentrated on ideas and literature. Decemberists, with their clear-cut political programs, covering constitution, republic, abolition of professional classes, military revolution and etc. were followed by the generations of abstract idealists of the 30s-40s whose views were rooted in social problems, such the relationships of the professional classes, the individual and society, peasant reform and others. At the same time, affected by the

populist theory («narodnost» — in Russian) eventually formulated in 1833 by Count S.S. Uvarov, Minister of People's Education, Russian social mentality had undergone essential changes. The historic and cultural opposition of Russia and Europe typical of the Alexander era became unpopular. It was replaced by the opposition of Russia and the West, ideas of national peculiarity, specific Russian ways of development, unique role of Russia in European and world history.

Philosophical reflections of idealists in the 30s-40s gradually focused on the ways of transforming unbecoming Russian life. Oppression and the gloomy atmosphere which characterized Nicholas' Russia urged Russian ideologists to turn to the ideas of freedom and progress, civilization and social justice, or in other words, to the reign of a perfect being. This explains why the educated noble society shared a great concern about Russian and world history, history and philosophy, orthodoxy and catholicism, Western European philosophy, divinity, i.e. the general approach to reality. No doubt, as a result, Russian ideologists in the 30s-40s of the 19th century could not but come to the establishment of various but always ideal models, i.e. Utopian models of the new society.

On the one hand, the intention to change contemporary Russian peculiarities meant negligence of Nicholas' regime by the Russian ideologists, thus making Russian ideas opposed to the actual regime. This explains at best the reserved and predominantly aggressive attitude of the Government and Nicholas the First towards all kinds of dissident thought beyond the official populist theory. The very thought itself was becoming suspect, dangerous and, consequently, persecuted.

On the other hand, the efforts made by the Russian intelligentsia to set up an ideal reality is, in fact, an attempt to construct a logically invulnerable, but actually, abstract and, therefore, impracticable theory, thus testifying a great gulf between the people and ideology.

Some ideologists presumed that ideal reality meant religion and mysticism. P.Y. Chaadayev, being one of them, opposed catholicism to orthodoxy and neglected the Russian past, present, future. Others idealized Russia before Peter I and its particularities — community, mode of life in the community, orthodoxy, autocracy; there were some that recognized only European civilization and European ways of development neglecting Russian peculiarities or, on the opposite, the ones like Gertsen that had constructed the theory of Russian socialism. However, irrespective of the ways they chose to retreat from reality or the present and approach the ideal or the future, all the representatives of Russian ideologists, no matter how different their views were, always opposed Russia to Europe.

Russian thought had to overcome many obstacles. In the Russian

atmosphere impregnated with illegality of those who had power and spiritual bondage of loyal subjects, sublime aspirations could not be expressed let alone accomplished. Only some Russian ideologists strongly adhered to their sublime views and formulated them in theories and systems. They were Slavic and Western advocates such as A.I. Gertsen and V.G. Belinsky. P.Y. Chaadayev and Petrashev movement members were not so successful. But «a vast majority of them failed to find their place in the sun». This had brought about a new phenomenon — there appeared people that were in an out-of-place situation, they were called «lishnye» in Russia.

The 18th and beginning of 19th centuries did not see «lishnye» people and it is only natural, because that was a heroic period in Russian history. It witnessed many an event such as the Poltava and Borodino battles, Radishev A.N. and Decemberists, Peter the Great's reforms and the «beautiful beginning of the Alexander era». The people fit the times. They were represented by a glorious galaxy of generals, admirals, diplomats, state and social figures, writers and poets. Being different in character, temperament and, frequently, social origin, they, however, had something in common — integrity of nature and historical optimism, natural endowments and positive mind, initiative and resourcefulness, self-confidence and certitude of being right to serve their cause.

The conditions for the appearance of «lishnye» people were idea at the end of Alexander's reign. That was the period of intensive centralization and bureaucratization of state structures including social ones. However, it was the defeat of the Decemberist movement that had eventually brought about the moral situation that made all intellectuals feel «lishnye» people.

Gertsen was the one who managed to comprehend better than anybody else the phenomenon of the «lishnye people». He asserted that «lishnye people» were those who had moulded their personality that made them superior to others in society by their spiritual and mental abilities. In fact most Russian noblemen and officials were ignorant and wholly void of spiritual ambitions. There was no cultural medium in the country. Clever and educated people made up a superior and rather thin layer of the society that could not influence the course of life, especially under the Nicholas regime. Alienated from the people and their own social environment, representing a small group, the Russian intelligentsia was doomed to loneliness, disillusionment and deep scepticism.

Their alienation from the official Russia affected Russian society differently. As a result, some of them turned to deep ideological reflections and because of them, independent Russian social ideas, philosophy and divinity were developed. Others, on the contrary, gave way to despair

and despondency, realizing their hopeless and useless existence. Unfortunately, most of the «lishnye» people were «recruited» from the latter. They were characterized by a lack of confidence, ruthless self-examination, emotional fatigue and apathy, inability to act, nostalgia for the ideal.

Russian literature had produced brilliant characters of «lishnye» people. They were lonely Chatsky, bored Onegin, depressed Pecherin «flimsy» Beltov, Rudin, Lavretsky. Society bored them; they were seized with «English spleen» and «Russian depression». They were lazy, weary, melancholic. They did not feel fit either in the town or in the village and were always «concerned and felt like moving from one place to another». Not only literary characters travelled, their authors travelled as well. They were A.S. Griboyedov, A.S. Pushkin, M.Y. Lermontov. Roaming was becoming one of the major topics in Russian literature, and not without reason, the «road» was turning into a peculiar philosophic category, embodying a life which itself was either limited by time and space, or had neither beginning nor end.

The «lishnye» people treated their service differently compared with their ancestors. In the 18th and at the beginning of the 19th century state service was considered an honoured and useful activity. Involved in Civil Service were not only thousands of noblemen but also many representatives of the Russian intelligentsia. Most prominent among them were Antioch Kantemir, G.R. Derzhavin, D.I. Fonvisin, A.N. Radishev, N.M. Karamzin, I.A. Krylov, A.N. Olenin, I.I. Dmitriev, Decemберists... The «lishnye» people, however, did not consider it their duty or conviction to be in the Civil Service. They served mechanically because their service created an illusion of activity, thus allowing them to retreat from the emotional discord; or it was considered by them as a means of existence. But most of them did not want to serve for moral reasons. «They wanted to serve but not as servants».

Vladimir Sergeyeovich Petcherin was one of them. «Reverend Petcherin»... Nicholas is responsible for his sin» — said Gertsen. These words are both truth and invention.

V.S. Petcherin was born in 1807 in an isolated province. His parents belonged to a group of small property-owners and noblemen; they were half-educated, his father being a rude and ignorant army officer and his mother a semi-literate, but kind and warm-hearted lady. He displayed early aptitude and gifts, however, was deprived of adequate conditions for their development. In 1825 he moved to Petersburg, in 1831 graduated from the University and in 1833 went to the Berlin University to advance his education and train for the title of professor. It is true that V.S. Petcherin (and provided he was sincere) asserted in 1873 that «he chose this sphere because there was no alternative». Except for his gifts, when

a boy, he did not differ from others of his age. Like them, he was fond of literature and theatre, experienced the strong influence of German Romanticism on himself. However he was absolutely unmoved by philosophy and moreover by politics. The Decemberists' uprising passed over him. When graduating from the University he was deeply immersed in the life of aristocratic society, indulging in amusements rather than in his work in high school (in Russian «Gymnasium»).

His visit abroad drastically changed his outlook. After staying in Europe for 2 years, travelling a lot in Germany, Switzerland, Italy, getting to know various trends of European ideas and sharing Madsini's radical views, he came back to Russia in low spirits. Being appointed an extraordinary professor in the Moscow University, he felt lonely and longed for Petersburg which seemed to him the centre of social life in this country. He was oppressed by the thought that he was doomed to live an aimless life in a despotic state among ignorant people, despising the ones, for whom getting into the graces of the authorities and promotion meant everything. He was scared to become like them. He finally came to the conclusion that Russia had no future and as a result neither did he. The West had turned into his ideal and dream. In 1836 he abandoned his motherland for good. This act testified that V.S. Petcherin adhered to the Uvarov principle — «Russia is not Europe», meaning Russia, in the negative sense.

After emigrating, he wandered about Europe for some years. As he said himself, he was a «Lamenne republican», «Saint-Simmon communist», keen on the philosophies of Buonarotti and Babeuf, Lui Blan, Pierre Leru, Michle, absorbed in reading J. Sand's novels. However he did not turn into a firm advocate of any of those theories. Characterizing V.S. Petcherin's state of mind at that time, Berdyayev, a prominent Russian philosopher, called him an «emotional revolutionary».

V.S. Petcherin's aspirations were not destined to be realized and his ideological reflections ended in failure: in 1840 he turned to catholicism, in 1841 took monastic vows and joined the Redemptory Order, in 1843 he was conferred the dignity of a catholic priest. In such a way he had lived for 20 years absolutely secluded from the outside world. In 1861, realizing that his mode of life was tragic, Petcherin broke with the Order and a year later settled in Ireland, Dublin, where he was confirmed as a chaplain of the main hospital; there he died in 1885.

V.S. Petcherin's life convincingly shows that his dominant feeling was of merciless negligence of the official Russia and of Russian life. And Petcherin faithful to the principle to the end. V.S. Petcherin's destiny was the Odyssey of dread of was Nicholas' Russia, the dread that had arisen from disillusionment and hatred, impossibility to speak, write or

think; the story of his life is an endeavour to retreat from Russia thus opposing it. The confession of catholicism and monastic vows he took were nothing but the highest degree of that negligence. He lived a life that did not agree with the historical course of events and it ended in loneliness and in vacuum. In this respect A.I. Gertsen was quite right by saying that V.S. Petcherin was a victim of the system established by Nicholas I.

But along with this, his drama was rooted in his character. He acted in accordance with his feelings rather than ideology or reason.

Having no clear convictions, being a person with a gentle character, never confident in himself, calling everything into question, egocentric to his very marrow, V.S. Petcherin was condemned to go to extremes. His contemporary Nicholas Stankevich wrote that «Unsteady people take no less risks abroad than in Russia».

V.S. Petcherin had broken with his motherland for good and never (either physically or mentally) come back to Russia. It is true that in the 60s-70s he wished Russia every success on the way of radical changes, believed in them and even asserted that not in the remote future would the world see two gigantic democracies — Russia in the East and America in the West: the Earth would relapse into silence before them». But in politics he idealized the constitutional-monarchical regime of England. V.S. Petcherin stands apart in the history of Russian social ideas. He followed his own peculiar way. However, independent as it seemed, he was typically Russian. V.S. Petcherin himself shared that point of view. V.S. Petcherin, like other «lishnye» people cannot be an example: his choice proved unacceptable even to his contemporaries. But one must admit, nevertheless, that to be in an «out-of-place» situation in Russia is a merit in itself. And V.S. Petcherin is worthy of acknowledgement by his descendants.