

**RUSSIAN NATIONALISM:
HERZEN AND THE GOING TO THE PEOPLE'S SEDUCTION**

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Abstract: the essay skilfully reconstructs the decadent parabola of the epitome of the Russian nationalist idea embodied in Aleksandr Herzen's formulation of Russian populism. The idea of going to the people, though ancient, constituted in Herzen's communitarist formulation an early cell of typically Russian national democracy. However, this glorious formula – metabolised de facto by all sides of Russian political and intellectual thought that developed at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries – dissolved in the meshes of revolutionary terror and authoritarianism added to the combination of war and revolution that swept Russia from 1905 onwards.

Keywords: Aleksandr Herzen – Russian Populism – going to the people – *obshchina* – Russian nationalism

1. The Formulation of Russian Populism

In the history of Russia, the nationalist phenomenon, understood as the formation of a national identity, has produced multiple outcomes. The most tangible signs of imperial Russian nationalism were produced in the 20th century, when the Great War induced the mobilisation of the masses¹. However, the first hypostasis of a Russian national manifestation was the populist phenomenon. As a peculiar political ideal of the Russian idea, Russian populism historically fused three different postulates: firstly, that Russian civilisation was distinct from Western civilisation, because Russia's historical development was characterised by an unprecedented «special way» (*osoby put*); secondly, that the Russian people had a fundamental world-historical mission to fulfil; and finally, that Russian political identity was founded on the normative superiority of its spiritual moral and religious values².

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¹ G. Savino, 2022.

² N.A. Berdjajev, 1971; A.S. Panarin, 2002.

The primogeniture of the populist ideology is attributed to Aleksandr Herzen, as an intellectual and early theorist of a socialist transformation to be developed in Russia. Herzen, starting in the 1840s, placed the idea of the *obshchina*, the peasant commune, at the centre of the revolutionary question in Russia. Disappointed by the results of the 1848 revolution in Europe, Herzen drew from Slavophile thought the conviction that the *obshchina* represented the highest form of social life³ and that communism was the national characteristic of the Russian people⁴. Russia's historical mission, according to Herzen, did not consist in realising a capitalist social order, similar to that of the decadent, antediluvian West, but in exploiting the advantages of its backwardness and realising a libertarian, rural socialism.

Regarding Russian socialism Herzen wrote: «the main tone of it we can understand now. It will belong to social ideas. Socialism will develop in all its phases to its extreme consequences, to the point of absurdity. Then again the cry of negation will burst forth from the titanic breast of the revolutionary minority, and again the mortal struggle will begin, in which socialism will take the place of the present conservatism and will be defeated by the coming revolution, unknown to us»⁵. According to Herzen, autocracy had to be eradicated as a foreign body to the development of living Russia, of the peasant community; only then would Russian socialism emerge from *obshchina*, as an original step in the economic-political development of Russia. On the other hand, according to Herzen, the state apparatus on which autocratic power was based was not national, but a consequence of the «Germanisation» of autocracy desired by Peter the Great⁶. Led by the intellectual wing, the populists emancipated the peasant community and so forged all future Russian political parties, from revolutionary to democratic and moderate (Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and Constitutional Democrats)⁷. However, on the one hand Herzen's creed was alienated from the philosopher's interpretation to take on different variants, and on the other hand, the populist phenomenon, although romantic in its original meaning, ended up dissolving in the lethal combination of war and revolution that swept through imperial Russia from 1905 onwards⁸.

2. Russian Populism and Terrorist Revolutionarism

Herzen's reflection on Russian socialism represented a turning point in the radical intelligentsia that had hitherto crystallised in a Hegelian-style philosophical dialectical

³ D. Stasi, 2020.

⁴ A. I. Herzen, 1931.

⁵ A. I. Herzen, 1993, 143-144.

⁶ R. Valle, 2004.

⁷ The moderate and partly liberal-conservative parties formulated the solution to the Russian peasant question from the socialist and populist ideas of Herzen. R. Gravina, 2021, 38.

⁸ R. Gravina, 2021, 76.

rationalism. From the moment the mass of peasants were freed from serfdom in 1861, they could finally become a revolutionary subject. In fact, from the 1860s onwards, the idea of discovery and of going to the people imposed itself in Russia at the same time. As a romantic idealisation of the people, the «narodnichestvo» represented the same theoretical and ideological background to which terrorist organisations such as *Zemlya i volya* and *Narodnaya volya* also drew in various ways. Terrorist practice was inspired by both the mission of going to the people and the nihilist philosophy and its violent methods. Revolutionary nihilism presented itself as a kind of science devoid of dogma and condemned the amorphism of existing social forms. The anarchist and nihilist attitude was epitomised by Mihail Bakunin's formula that the passion for destruction was a creative source⁹. The crusade towards the people reached its peak in the summer of 1874 and was the first true mass revolutionary movement in the history of modern Russia. In essence, before slipping to the frankly terrorist line in the early 1870s, the Russian populist movement had tried to give itself a constructive orientation. In 1869, Bakunin's call to go to the people characterised the «narodniki», the populists: the political novelty of this movement layed not so much in its conception of the Russian rural community as the basis for the transition to socialist collectivism – an idea that had already been elaborated for decades – as in the need they posed to establish the closest possible contact with the peasant masses who, apart from spontaneous uprisings, had never given themselves a political organisation that would gather their aspirations and guide them in a planned and conscious political action. The most organic ideological orientation had been inaugurated by Petr Lavrov's Historical Letters¹⁰. According to Lavrov, self-election was not enough, the educated class owed a debt to the people, that of improving the condition of their less fortunate brothers and sisters. The revolutionary had to exile himself from cultural and conspiratorial circles and go to the people, becoming a warrior in the name of the Russian people. Activists were to disband among the peasant masses, sharing their way of life or serving them as teachers, doctors, midwives. These activists tried to merge the Christian message, the only one the peasants knew, with the revolutionary one: they combined Christ with the motto freedom equality fraternity. The repentant nobleman and the enraged plebeian, as members of the revolutionary intelligentsia, had to put themselves at the service of the people with self-denial: only in this case was it possible to atone for the sin of their own high-ranking origins or privileged status¹¹.

⁹ S. Nechaev and M. Bakunin, 1869.

¹⁰ P. L. Lavrov, 1884.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

3. *The Going to the People as the Impossible Outcome of Populism*

The morphology and phenomenology of Russian populism arose, first and foremost, from the debate on *narodnost* («popular element», «spiritual characteristics of the people», «nationality») that had developed in its early days since the 1820s¹². The term *narodnost* referred to the people as a nation and was opposed to *natsionalnost* (nationality). Slavophiles identified *narodnost* with the 'nation' as a whole and tended to regard the people as separate from the autocracy¹³. But for Herzen, *narodnost* transpired, conversely, from the «innocent purity» of the Russian peasantry living within the *obshchina*. As the first ideologist of Russian populism, Herzen had succeeded in politicising the speculations of the Russian intelligentsia and formulating an active political ideology directed against the autocratic regime. The populist ideology had been a creative synthesis of Westernism and Slavophilism with a real socialist perspective. Herzen's Russian populism had affirmed the *narodnaya* (national-popular) Russia. It was exactly on this that a misunderstanding emerged between Slavophilism that later merged into terrorism and populist Occidentalism. The Herzenians' «going to the people» remained a romantic issue. Within the intelligentsia, two camps confronted each other: on the one hand, those who saw the reforms as a strengthening of the empire; on the other hand, those who saw the liberation of the serfs as a historic opportunity to stir up a jacquerie and bring down autocratic power.

The nihilist ideologue Dmitri Pisarev called the debate on *narodnost* the «scholasticism of the 19th century»¹⁴: the study of the life of the people had involved both the Slavophiles (Khomyakov, Kireevsky, Aksakov), as well as «Vremya», the journal directed by Dostevsky that supported the programme of *pochvennichestvo* (return to the native soil), and «Sovremennik» directed by the Westernist populist Chernyshevsky. *Narodnost'* – along with *pravoslaviye* (orthodoxy) and *samoderzhaviye* (autocracy) – also became part of the triad that defined the «official» ideological horizon of Nicholas I's Russia. But the reform enacted by Alexander II soon disappointed the radical intelligentsia, who saw it as a conspiracy of the tsar and nobles against the peasants.

The dichotomy between the party of reform and the party of revolution went beyond the traditional dualism between Slavophiles and Westernists and pitted two enemy parties against each other. For the revolutionary party, the momentum of reforms from above had instantly petered out (as the 1863 Polish uprising against Russian rule and the harsh suppression of student and peasant uprisings in Russia demonstrated): the liberating tsar had casually moved from enfranchising serfs to «massacre and terror».

For Herzen, 1861 was to be remembered not only for the reforms, but also because it marked the beginning of the Russian civil war, which took the form of a permanent and

¹² H. Rogger, 1992.

¹³ W. Giusti, 1939.

¹⁴ D. I. Pisarev, 1861.

telluric insurrection of the *obshchina* against the autocratic state. The European revolution had consigned the land to oblivion; the Russian revolution was to be an entirely new revolution and would be the outcome of the alliance between two destructive forces: the peasants (courage of revolt) and the radical intelligentsia (courage of denial).

Herzen recognised that the autocracy, availing itself of glasnost' (freedom of expression), was attempting to nationalise itself by calling the national idea to its support. As the ideologist of Great Russia Struve recalled in 1905, the process of the «nationalisation of autocracy»¹⁵ began from the moment when Slavophilism (which during the reign of Nicholas I had been put on the censorship index) was called to be a governing party (especially with Alexander III): the process of nationalising the autocracy's consciousness immunised it against the 'revolutionary whirlwind', even if a «seed of revolution» was hatching in this victory of the political spirit of reaction¹⁶. The nationalisation of the idea of empire was expressed through the Balkan War of 1877 and the expansion into Central Asia (the Great Game for hegemony over Central Asia that pitted Russia against Great Britain between 1807 and 1907) attempted to arouse the imperialist fever and aggressive panslavism (its main ideologue was the former Fourierist socialite Danilevsky: an advocate of the historio-sophic theory of «cultural-historical types», Danilevsky claimed that the Latin-Germanic «cultural-historical» type was in decline, while the Slavic type was on the rise and it was up to Russia to pick up the spoils of the Ottoman Empire and conquer Constantinople). After the 1905 revolution, Stolypin attempted to revitalise the idea of empire by identifying it with Greater Russia.

Ultimately, the missionary work of the narodniki proved fruitless: beyond the humanitarian rhetoric, they failed to cross the insurmountable line dividing the intelligentsiya from the people. The bitter disappointment decisively led the revolutionaries down the road of terrorism, inaugurating a first phase from 1878 (the year of the choice) to 1881, the year of the tsar's assassination. According to Sofia Perovskaya (the protagonist of the Tsar's assassination), terrorism was «a fatal, inevitable phenomenon of Russian political life ... a reaction to the corrosive effect of the oppression exerted by the ferocious, ruthless, and well-organised gang of criminals, murderers, and debauched bigots who held political power in their hands»¹⁷.

As Herzen stated: «there is no one to blame, it's not their fault, it's not our fault, it's the misfortune of being born when the whole world -- dies!»¹⁸.

¹⁵ M. Niqueux, 2022.

¹⁶ P. B. Struve, 1911.

¹⁷ S. A. I. Perovskaya, 1918, 285-290.

¹⁸ A. I. Herzen, 1866.

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