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Concepts of Liberty from Conditions of Tyranny: Alexander Herzen and His Place in Nineteenth Century European Thought

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Preface

Although historians often look to the intellectual climate of Western Europe to understand the development of the ideas of individual liberty, some of our most potent ideals of freedom come from Russia. This article is about Alexander Herzen (1812-1870), a lesser known Russian intellectual of the mid-nineteenth century. Often considered the "father of Russian socialism," Herzen was heavily influenced by West European thought, but ultimately the history and conditions of Russian society, and his own experiences, provided the context that informed his thoughts about individual liberty.

Introduction

Ideas concerning individual liberty in the history of modern Europe are usually associated with intellectuals from the West, and reasonably so. In the eighteenth century, French *philosophes* led the European Enlightenment based on science and reason. In the Romantic era of the nineteenth century, German and English intellectuals sought to free themselves from the mechanistic approach of Enlightened thinking by suggesting an aesthetic and more personal component to this ideal. It was, thus, the cultural elite of the more powerful and, some believe, more progressive states in Europe that preached the right and necessity of individual liberty in the pursuit of personal and public happiness.

In the annals of modern history, however, we can find some of the most distinctive ideas about liberty in what some believed to be the most oppressive Great Power in Europe: Russia. It may be argued, that because of the politically repressive nature of the Russian autocracy, notions of individual liberty were more likely to emerge and were all the more meaningful. One of the most influential of Russian intellectuals who advanced this ideal was Alexander Herzen. Yet he is little known in the West. In part, this is so because most of his writings have not been translated from their original Russian. But one can also surmise that Russia’s historic reputation as a politically and economically backward state full of misery and oppression has played a part in the West’s ignorance of this intellectual giant.

Indeed, for most of his life Herzen placed the ideal of individual liberty at the core of his thought and action.

Herzen was born on March 25, 1812 just months before Napoleon's army assaulted his native city of Moscow. Some historians view this period as a watershed in the history of the Russian *ancien regime*.[1] Russia's military victory over Napoleon's forces seemed to secure the country's status as one of the Great Powers of Europe. Yet within this Great Power there was an increasing discontent with the regime's despotic rule and suppression of personal freedom.[2]

Herzen's own ideas concerning individual liberty first emerged during his childhood. Herzen was the son of a wealthy landowner. In his memoirs, he portrayed his father as cold and sometimes cruel.[3] His father's serf servants were trained to be submissive and obedient. Even Herzen's German mother appeared uncomfortable in her foreign surroundings. Indeed, his father never married her and Herzen could not carry his father's surname Iakovlev, but was named Herzen, meaning "love child." These early experiences nurtured Herzen's concerns for individuals in oppressive circumstances.[4]

Herzen turned to books in order to escape his home life. His earliest education was primarily western, dominated by French and German romanticism.[5] Herzen's French tutor first acquainted him with the writer who had the greatest influence on Herzen: Friedrich von Schiller (1759-1805).[6] "Schiller: I bless thee," Herzen later wrote, "to thee I owe the most sacred moments of early youth."[7] Schiller's general philosophy stressed that an individual could only be free by unleashing the senses, emotions, and passions of the soul. The heroes of Schiller's plays did just that in spite of the constraints placed on them. Plays like *The Robbers* (1781)[8] and *William Tell* (1804)[9] served as an escape from Herzen's loneliness. Schiller taught Herzen "to prove himself capable of the deeds as nobly patriotic" as these fictional characters.[10] He often sat outdoors reading Schiller aloud and imagined himself in a Bohemian forest.[11]

The germination of Schillerian ideas of self-fulfilment and heroism coincided with two events that further promoted Herzen's intellectual growth: the Decembrist uprising and the beginning of his lifelong friendship with Nicholas Ogarev. In December 1825 a revolutionary group of mainly officers from aristocratic families rose up in revolt against Russian despotism. The 'Decembrists' were liberals in the tradition of the Enlightenment, having been influenced by French Revolutionary ideology during the Napoleonic Wars. They hoped to establish constitutionalism and basic freedoms in Russia. After the group revolted, its leaders were executed and the regime, thereafter under Nicholas I (1825-1855), continued to react sharply to criticism. Herzen was fourteen years old when the Decembrist leaders were hanged. The revolt signalled Herzen's political awakening. In his memoirs he recalled that "politics was now in the foreground."[12] With his Russian tutor he "longed to communicate [his] ideas" and from him Herzen received and read poems about liberty and freedom.[13]

He also shared his political ideas with his cousin Nicholas Ogarev. Herzen's German tutor had introduced the two youths, who immediately became close friends.[14] They had similar intellectual tastes and read Schiller together. Herzen recalled that he and Ogarev had a "passionate interest in the whole of humanity."[15] Their friendship allowed Herzen both to escape his loneliness[16] and to nurture his sympathies for the Decembrists. Indeed, the two youths had met in

1827, just two years after the Decembrist revolt. Herzen was sixteen years old and Ogarev was fifteen. At about this time[17] on Sparrow Hills overlooking Moscow, the two youths vowed “to sacrifice" their "lives to the struggle [they] had chosen.” While still a teenager, therefore, Herzen had embraced a vague messianic spirit of humanitarian protest that he would continue to foster for the remainder of his life.

Social protest, however, was the concern of just a few among Herzen’s generation. Chance and happenstance brought these few individuals together. In 1829, Herzen and Ogarev registered at the University of Moscow where the two began a philosophic circle. For Herzen, the circle represented “a continuous feast of friendship, an exchange of ideas, of inspiration, of revelry.”[18]

Herzen and his circle were particularly drawn to writings concerning Russia’s future. Nowhere was this more powerfully and shockingly presented than in the *Philosophical Letter* by Peter Chaadaev (1794-1856).[19] Published in 1836 in Moscow’s liberal journal *Telescope*, the *Letter* was a pessimistic critique of everything Russian. Chaadaev argued that Russia’s adherence to the Orthodox faith contributed to its isolation from western Christendom’s cultural and political development. He declared that there was no value in Russia’s past or present and, therefore, no hope for a prosperous future.

Chaadaev’s letter had inspired a debate that had long been growing among Russian intellectuals who by then had split into opposing camps of “Slavophiles” and “Westernizers.” The Slavophiles[20] believed in the superiority of Russian society based on the presence of the Orthodox religion and the peasant commune. [21] The former quality provided *sobornost* or harmony and integration, the Slavophiles argued. The peasant commune, however, was the practical expression of that integration and provided peace and stability in the social life of Russia. The Westernizers,[22] however, viewed the West’s political and social development as superior to Russia’s and thus worthy emulating. They argued that Russians needed to adopt western institutional models and liberal government and assigned little importance to the role of religion.

As a Westernizer, Herzen was both shocked and thrilled by what he had read in Chaadaev’s *The Letter*. “Twice I stopped to take a breath, and to collect my thoughts and feelings and then I read on and on.”[23] Herzen believed that underlying Chaadaev’s criticism was an attack on the authoritarian tradition in Russia and its inevitable restrictions on individual liberty. “The whip and the rod” ruled Russia, he argued.[24] For Herzen, the contrast between European freedom and Russian slavery was clear. “In Paris,” he argued, “a Russian is a thousand times more open” than he is in his own country. In Russia there is a “multitude of spies” whose contacts with the authorities lead to “frightful persecutions … unimaginable in foreign lands.”[25] The West European “sense of equity,” he suggested, was “a trait entirely undeveloped in us [Russians].” “As Chaadaev says in his article” he asserted, there is “something lacking in our nature: we are unable to make the European syllogism.”[26]

The Russian authorities’ constant surveillance of Herzen, no doubt, contributed to this embittered view. Herzen’s attraction to forbidden books and philosophic circles led him into a new stage in his life—that of arrests and exile in the 1830s and early 1840s. These experiences had shaped Herzen's thought. By this time Herzen was also married with children. His personal experiences with the Russian police state, coupled with his concerns for his family’s welfare meant that he could no longer concern himself solely with his own self-fulfilment.[27]

His exile[28] to Novgorod in the early 1840s crystallized this theme in his life. Here Herzen was head of the department dealing with passports and counterfeiters.[29] He also looked after cases of abuse of power, particularly by landowners. He observed how the landed class served its own needs, abused its power, and ultimately escaped punishment. Herzen recalled having reviewed cases in which servants were “flogged to death,” made to “kneel in filth” while being “beat … about the back and the head,” and had been subject to “all sorts of wrongs” for “several years.” In one case, a lady kept a servant girl without her consent. Despite the girl’s petition to Herzen’s department, his superiors did nothing.[30] Herzen's experiences in Novgorod informed his growing concern for Russia’s political and social system that he would later criticize more openly in print.

Herzen’s experiences at Novgorod coincided with an analogous intellectual shift from idealism to realism. In particular, he began to incorporate the ideas of German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831). Although Hegel, like Schiller before him, perceived the world as fundamentally egocentric, he also saw individual fulfilment as inextricably linked to society.[31] Personal happiness and freedom could not be achieved without considering an individual’s relationship to other individuals. The state, in Hegel’s view, was the embodiment of the hopes and dreams of individuals within it.

Inspired by Hegel, Herzen began to develop a hybrid version of reform for Russia. Although still a Westernizer, Herzen also reflected on the significance of the Slavophile position. He argued that although the Slavophiles overemphasized the importance of Orthodoxy and nationalism, they were to be praised for expressing confidence that Russians could follow their own path to freedom. He commended the Slavophiles for having “unearthed from under the manure of an artificial civilisation” those “elements of Russian life” that were the heart and soul of Russian society: the peasant masses.[32] Herzen argued that the peasant possessed an instinctive spirit of cooperation that could provide Russia with the foundation for true democracy.[33] Herzen, therefore, became the first Russian intellectual to develop a more comprehensive theory of a purely Russian kind of socialism that married together elements of the western European and Russian traditions.[34]

This marked the beginning of Herzen’s ideas about the possibilities of socialism in Russia. It was not, however, in his beloved homeland that he would fully develop these views, but while living in western Europe. The stifling atmosphere in Russia and his desire to explore the lands from which his early thought derived propelled him to leave. With family in tow, Herzen left in early 1847 to travel to France and to the lands of Germany. After just a few short months in Paris, however, Herzen’s idealized image of the West began to change. He came to believe that what he and others had thought of as an advanced world with progressive ideas was, in fact, a sham. Herzen did not lose any time in saying so as correspondent for the Russian journal *The Contemporary*. “Down with idols,” Herzen proclaimed, “our primitive icon painting give idols unnatural poses.”[35] He concluded that The West had reached an impasse in its quests for individual liberty, and that it was the rise of bourgeois culture which had caused this apathy. Writing to his Russian readers, Herzen asserted that “material interests” had “crowded out all others.” In reference to the French Revolution, he further argued “that the ideas, the words, that so recently moved individuals and the masses, impelling them to leave their homes and families to take arms and go to the defense of what they held sacred and to overthrow hostile idols, have lost their magnetic force." Instead of noble goals, capitalist social relations had brought about decadence and apathy. The rhetoric of freedom was "repeated now from habit and civility, like the poets' invocation of Olympus and the muses, or the deists' use of the word 'god.'"[36]

This early disillusionment foreshadowed Herzen's devastation following the European revolutions of 1848. The Paris revolution in February[37] ignited a wave of revolts elsewhere in Austria, Hungary, Italy and in the German states. The year began with a wave of optimism as a diverse coalition of students, workers and political radicals joined forces against what they saw as repressive monarchical regimes. Herzen himself witnessed these events as they unfolded in Paris, beginning with the June Days when barricades were erected, and ending with the ultimate failure of the revolution when Louis Napoleon became president of the Second Republic.

Having witnessed the ultimate failure of the revolution, Herzen could not help but feel bitterly disappointed. In *Letters From France and Italy* and in a collection of essays called *From the Other Shore*, both written in 1848-49, Herzen poured out his feelings of grief and anger.[38] "I am recovering from those June Days," Herzen wrote, "as if after a grave illness."[39] The bloody retribution of the French authorities taught Herzen that an ill-prepared revolution only leads to counter-revolution. For Herzen, the lesson was this: revolt only when success is certain. "Either execute and go forward," he wrote, "or grant a reprieve and stop midway."[40] Herzen, however, did not completely abandon the idea of revolution. He asserted that in order to hasten the destruction of tyranny and oppression, revolution was absolutely necessary. "So," Herzen concluded, "long live chaos and destruction! *Vive la mort*! And may the future triumph."[41]

Disappointment and disillusion soon led him to leave the Continent. In the summer of 1852, he travelled to England. Here, Herzen could witness firsthand the freedom of speech and freedom of intellectual exchange that he had only read about. In his youth, Herzen had taken an interest in English history, philosophy, literature and art. Philosophers like Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Isaac Newton (1642-1727), John Locke (1632-1704) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) appealed to his early liberal sentimentalities.[42] In London, he made the acquaintance of other international exiles and met members of the Chartist movement.[43]

Herzen's admiration for English state and society was, however, limited. He believed that although the English prided themselves in their freedom, their self-absorption precluded them from encouraging this same freedom in countries such as Russia.[44] The publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852, the year Herzen arrived in England, sharpened this reality for him. The novel was well-received and stirred widespread enthusiasm in England. Herzen, however, was deeply disappointed in the English public's single-minded concern for American slavery without regard to the kind of slavery found in Russia.[45] Herzen looked upon the English as he did his father's generation in Russia: decorative, but useless.[46] Herzen favoured the freedom of speech in England only in so far as his political asylum was concerned. Unwilling to fully integrate into English society, he felt closest to international émigrés like the Italians and the Poles. His association with the latter, helped him to refocus his attentions on the country closest to his heart.

In 1853, with the help of Polish technical and underground aid, Herzen established the Free Russian Press. It was the first large-scale effort to publish the uncensored word in Russia. It also marked a watershed in Herzen's activism. Thereafter he consistently worked towards the destruction of what he and others believed to be the core of Russian enslavement—serfdom. In February 1853, he wrote an article called *To My Brothers in Russia* that reflected this new direction:

> Why are we silent? Do we really have nothing to say? Or are we really silent because we do not dare to speak? … If we all sit with our arms crossed, satisfied with arid complaint and noble indignation, if we all wisely avoid every danger and, confronted by some obstacle, make no effort to step over it or walk round it, so long will enlightened days fail to reach Russia.[47]

What followed was a series of protests criticizing the Russian system. In one article he implored Russian landowners to give up their serfs. Russians could not be free, he argued, if they continued to hold other Russians in bondage. "It is impossible," he wrote "to be a free man and to possess servants purchased like cattle." For Herzen it was a tragic irony "to talk of human rights when you are the owner of human souls."[48]

This marked the beginning of Herzen's public exhortations regarding the peasant commune and its role in Russian socialism.[49]

Herzen's brand of socialism was related to its earliest French proponents. French intellectuals like Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825), Charles Fourier (1772-1837), Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865), Louis Blanc (1811-1882), as well as Welshman Robert Owen (1771-1858) informed Herzen's socialism. These thinkers believed that the clarion call for liberty, equality and fraternity had not yet been implemented following the French Revolution.[50] Indeed, Herzen himself believed that "the world is awaiting a rebirth that the revolution of 1789 destroyed."[51] Because of his aversion to simplistic doctrines, Herzen's socialism was a composite of ideas from Fourier's ideal of communal living, to Blanc's concept about the organization of labour and wages, to Proudhon's suggestions regarding the re-organization of private property. For Herzen, to commit to one kind of socialism meant an adherence to formulaic solutions that diminished the freedom of individual expression.

One idea, however, did frequently appear in Herzen's writings, that is the idea of 'palingenesis.' Inspired by Saint-Simon, Herzen applied the idea of palingenesis, or social renewal, to Russian society. While ridding the term of its mystical and religious overtones, Herzen argued that after centuries of oppression the whole of Russian society needed to be 're-born' through revolution. This new society would then eliminate oppression and injustice and establish an entirely new society based on individual liberty.[52]

Scholars, however, have made far too much of Herzen's Saint-Simonism,[53] at the expense of his Fourierism. It was Fourier who, Herzen argued, had "gone into the question of socialism more deeply than other systems." It was Fourier who gave him a clearer understanding of the potential role of the peasant commune for Russia's future ideal. It was at this stage in his intellectual growth that he came to believe that "the organization of the commune is the cornerstone of the social edifice."[54] Herzen argued that westernization could actually come from below, that is from the peasant commune, or *mir.* For the first time, Herzen linked the idea of individual freedom to that of the collective spirit.

It was when Herzen applied socialist ideals to the *mir* that his theory of Russian socialism emerged in its most developed form. In *The Russian People and Socialism* written earlier in 1851, Herzen reiterated his belief that because of the *mir* Russia could be the first country to achieve socialism. He argued that it was the *mir* that recognized "rights and duties," and "law." Russian peasants "rarely cheat each other" and have a "family life that is highly developed."[55] For Herzen, the Russian peasant had an instinct for socialism. The peasant had also endured the Tartar yoke, the Napoleonic campaign, oppression of landowners and autocratic tyranny and yet the commune remained intact.[56] The *mir* was, thus, an untapped source of strength, stability and liberty in Russia. He cautioned that there was no feedom for Russians without "the emancipation of the peasants."[57] "In Russia," Herzen wrote, "the future belongs to the peasant."[58]

Prospects for socialism in Russia markedly improved with the death of Tsar Nicholas I in March 1855. The new tsar, Alexander II, soon to be called the "Tsar Liberator" was then known for his liberal inclinations.[59] Alexander had declared publicly his intention to abolish serfdom. Herzen responded enthusiastically to the news in his new periodical called *The Polar Star*. The first publication came out in August 1855 as an open letter that supported the Tsar's position. "Give land to the serfs," he wrote. "It belongs to them. Hurry!"[60]

The Polar Star was sold openly in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and found its way to Tobolsk, Irkutsk, Tomsk and other Siberian towns where Decembrist émigrés lived.[61] But in order to give Russia a more up-to-date paper Herzen, together with Ogarev who had arrived in England in 1856, started a newspaper called *The Bell*. Both Herzen and Ogarev wanted to rouse Russia from its apathy. *The Bell* promoted no specific political program because the two friends had intended that it should be a free forum of expression. They hoped, however, to use the paper as a vehicle through which to demand an end to Russian serfdom. For the next five years until serf emancipation, Herzen and Ogarev used the paper to expose the evils of serfdom. But when the Tsar finally dissolved serfdom in February 1861, the wording of the statute indicated that liberation could take years. Herzen responded openly to what he saw as half-hearted reforms. In an article called "The Giant Has Been Sleeping Too Long," he argued that freedom was inevitable and that the peasant would soon rise up in "all parts of our vast native land," like "a great wave heaving in a turbulent sea."[62]

But by this time Herzen's and Ogarev's generation had been superseded by a younger and more radical one. This younger circle of intellectuals barely remembered the repressive regime of Nicholas I. Under Alexander censorship was less restrictive. They were also the generation that had lived through the Revolutions of 1848 and thus had no illusions about the prospects for change in Russia. The transition from romanticism to realism was complete, but it had also acquired a more violent character. Often referred to as the "sons" in contrast with the "fathers" of the forties, these radicals followed the teachings of men like Nicholas Chernyshevsky (1828-1889). Chernyshevsky promoted utilitarianism and realism, in contrast with the German idealistic philosophy of Herzen's generation.[63] In this view, action, however immoral or terrorist, should be used against a repressive police state if any change was to take place in Russia. Although these rebels of the sixties were disciples of men like Herzen and fellow-Westernizer Vissarion Belinsky (1811-1848),[64] their admiration turned sour, especially after the Polish rebellion of 1863.[65] During this crisis, the support of the government by some Westernizers fueled their hostility toward the older generation and the tsarist regime. In spite of Alexander's reforms, which were the most significant Russia had seen since Peter I, they fell far short of the expectations of these young radicals, one of whom assassinated the Tsar Liberator in 1881.[66]

The first terrorist attempt at regicide took place in April 1866. Some argue that this event initiated a new and final phase in Herzen's thought.[67] Herzen's reaction to the event was disapproving. He criticized the younger generation for its rash actions in *The Bell*, calling the attempt as "no cause for rejoicing." He asserted that "we expect disaster to follow and were indignant that some fanatic should have taken responsibility into his own hands."[68] Herzen's views in 1866 were strikingly similar to those he proffered following the failure of 1848: he wished for the revolutionists to be thoroughly prepared in order to avoid the consequences of a counter-revolution.[69] Having witnessed the failure of 1848, Herzen was skeptical of the efficacy of single acts and specific revolutionary doctrines. As Isaiah Berlin writes, Herzen believed that "no specific theory or single doctrine, no one interpretation of life" whether based on "French mechanistic models of the eighteenth century" or "romantic German edifices of the nineteenth" could be "true solutions to real problems."[70]

Indeed, Herzen's emphasis on individual self-fulfilment, a product of his early education, helped to explain his position. He argued that the ends can never justify the means when those means included human sacrifice or the victimization of individuals. A revolution at all costs nullified the ultimate goal of revolution—public happiness based on the principle of individual liberty. In a conversation with Blanc about civic duty, Herzen's position was clear. Blanc remarked that people had to sacrifice themselves to society. "Why?" Herzen asked. "How do you mean why?" replied Blanc, "surely the whole purpose and the whole mission of man is the well-being of society?" Whimsically, Herzen replied, "oh, but it will never be attained if everybody makes sacrifices and nobody enjoys himself." "You're playing with words," said Blanc. "Only the muddle-headedness of a barbarian," concluded Herzen.[71] For Herzen, the purpose of the struggle was to gain liberty today not tomorrow. "Why is liberty valuable?" Herzen wrote. "Because it is an end in itself, because it is what it is. To bring it as a sacrifice to something else is simply to perform an act of human sacrifice."[72] He believed that it was an absurdity to preach human sacrifice for the sake of a utopian future. The necessity of delivering people from existing oppression had to be the ultimate aim.

Although the peasant commune acted as a model for freedom in Russia, Herzen believed that the Russian peasant was hopelessly ill-equipped for the task of revolutionary leadership. The mere presence of the commune, he argued, did not automatically lead to socialism.[73] "We call upon the masses to rise and crush the tyrants. The masses! The masses are indifferent to individual freedom ….[but] they want a government which will rule for them, not against them."[74] Russia needed to merge the idea of the commune with the west European ideal of the freedom of the individual. How could this be achieved? Herzen posited that Russia's Westernized minority represented the ideal in revolutionary leadership. They were educated and talented and willing to make fundamental changes to the tsarist order.[75] They were prepared for change because "the Petersburg period….completely frees us from all obligation" to the past.[76] This "party of progress"[77] alone was prepared to rally against the tsarist regime, to "protest against it, fight against it, denounce and undermine it."[78] Russia's educated elite, Herzen concluded, could afford to be tenaciously single-minded because "we are too oppressed, too unhappy to be content with half-freedom."[79]

Herzen thus claimed that it was the duty of every intellectual to educate society. In this way, mass support and acquiescence toward reform, and eventually revolution, was assured. Propaganda was Herzen's *raison d'etre*. He took to this task with fierce dedication despite the severe limitations imposed by Russian censorship. Indeed, such circumstances required ingenuity. As Herzen wrote in December 1868, the Russian activist should not "cross [his] arms," but "look for a new route."[80] In keeping with this idea, Herzen decided that the only way to reach the public was to publish openly. He also argued that before a revolution, its leadership needed to plan in secret, in order to prevent reaction from the government. "Threats without strength are harmful."[81]

But by this time, the new generation of radicals viewed Herzen's ideas as either too cautious or too cowardly. As early as 1863, a student and member of the revolutionary organization Land and Liberty[82] named Utin arrived in London, where Herzen invited him to join *The Bell*'s editorial board. Utin, however, preferred to go to Switzerland where other young Russians were staying. In the two years that followed, however, Herzen continued to seek collaboration with the younger generation and even transferred *The Bell* to Geneva. This move did not lead to the collaboration for which Herzen had hoped. While Utin and the younger Russian intellectuals wanted the journal to be used as an organ for Land and Liberty, Herzen wanted it to remain "the organ of social development in Russia."[83] Thereafter, the atmosphere in Geneva became increasingly disagreeable. The younger radicals viewed Herzen as old fashioned and his tactics for revolutionary agitation too "soft." Even Ogarev had become disillusioned with the meagre results of their propagandistic efforts.

Feeling isolated, Herzen sought and received permission to settle among friends like Proudhon in Brussels in August 1869. Later that year, he received news from Florence that his daughter Tata was on the verge of a nervous breakdown after refusing a suitor. He took Tata away to France for some rest, but while in Paris he fell ill and never recovered. On January 21 1870, Alexander Herzen, at the age of fifty nine, died.

By the end of his life, Herzen had lost much of his fame and influence among Russia's intellectual elite. His important place among them, however, is no less extraordinary. He made influential contributions to Russian philosophy, literature, and revolutionary socialist thought. During his lifetime he was as popular to his European contemporaries as Blanc and Marx. By the time he left Russia in 1847, he had already made a name for himself through his publications on individual liberty. Some of his later writings were translated into French and German and his popularity abroad was evident during his London days.

So what was it that had attracted his contemporaries to his thought and activities? The answer can be found in a single word: liberty. This was his ultimate political passion and evident in all his writings. Western philosophic, especially German romantic, thinking was his primary influence despite certain claims to the contrary.[84] Although Schiller taught him to liberate himself, even in the midst of confinement, Hegel offered Herzen a method of applying egocentric concepts of liberty to revolutionary theory. That these ideas were purely theoretical in no way diminishes their importance. A necessary prerequisite for action is a potent ideal. But while Herzen absorbed western ideals of freedom his frustration at the inability to apply these to Russia, and later to the West, prompted him to reassess his thought.

Indeed, for Herzen the Slavs held the key that opened the door to true socialism. He argued that the survival of communal living, of co-operation in the midst of confinement, of mutual assistance in abject misery, bespoke a more superior form of liberating oneself than any western philosophy. His debates with the Slavophiles first stirred this within him and prompted him to see that the nature of Russian life and history had an intrinsic value all its own. Yet Herzen never wholly abandoned ideas that were rooted in the western tradition. Instead, he became the first Russian intellectual to translate the western revolutionary rhetoric of individual liberty to the peasant in the context of the Russian commune.

Herzen's life experience seemed to reflect this. From his restrictive home life to his period in exile, from police surveillance inside Russia to the necessity of creating the underground press outside Russia, Herzen emerged as among the foremost propagandists for individual liberty in Europe. Having acquired his own freedom outside of Russia, he now promoted the idea of liberty to those still in Russia. For most of his life inside and outside of Russia, as writer, philosopher, and activist critic, Herzen placed the ideal of individual liberty at the core of his thought and flew in the face of conventional European wisdom.

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[1] Martin Malia, *Alexander Herzen and Russian Socialism, 1812-1855* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1961), 9.

[2] This spirit of criticism had long been growing since the days of Peter I at the turn of the eighteenth century. It began as an attempt to restructure Russian institutions according to western models. The Emperor hoped to make Russia a modern power on par with countries like Britain and France. In order to ensure that his policies were executed, Peter introduced obligatory service for Russia's nobles by which they were required to serve either in the army or in the civil administration. This had meaningful consequences for Russia's intellectual class. Peter not only created a colossal bureaucracy, but he inadvertently introduced Western philosophical thought into the country. It soon became the principal intellectual influence in Russia. It was imbued with social and political criticism that was, in its essentials, an appeal for personal freedom that effectively weakened the bond between tsar and nobility. See Marc Raeff, *Origins of the Russian Intelligentsia: The Eighteenth Century Nobility* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1966).

[3] Alexander Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts: The Memoirs of Alexander Herzen* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 65-66. Herzen believed his father was "perpetually dissatisfied with everything" and was afflicted with an "irritability that filled his soul."

[4] Isaiah Berlin, "Herzen and His Memoirs," in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1979), 191.

[5] The Romantic Movement was an outgrowth of the Enlightenment. Enlightened thinkers surmised that since Newtonian laws of physical bodies were discoverable, so too were natural laws that governed society. Once uncovered through the use of one's faculties of reason and common sense, society could function optimally and human happiness would follow. After the French Revolution, however, these hopes were dashed. Misery and oppression continued. The philosophies of the Romantic period, therefore, sought to promote a more organic view of the world beyond the merely mechanical one espoused by

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French *philosophes*. People needed to cultivate their souls. In doing so, the happiness of society could be achieved through the individual.

[6] Malia, 44.

[7] Ibid., 38

[8] This was Schiller's first play about two brothers whose passions drive them to extremes. One brother's greed leads him to plot his benevolent father's death. The other brother, in the spirit of Robin Hood, organizes a robber band whose rebellion against society leads to acts of terror.

[9] This was Schiller's last published play. The story is a revisiting of the legend of William Tell. A mountain man, Tell is angry at the cruel treatment of the peaceful Swiss under the Austrian representative Gessler. After suffering a time under Gessler, the heroic Tell leads a revolt against the Austrians.

[10] Malia, 13.

[11] Ibid., 44.

[12] Herzen, My Past and Thoughts, 45, 46.

[13] Ibid., 46.

[14] Ibid., 59.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., 13.

[17] There is some dispute concerning the date of the Sparrow Hills vow or whether the oath actually took place.

[18] Quoted in Malia, 67.

[19] Chaadaev was the son of a nobleman. He had fought in the Russian army during the Napoleonic Wars, but soon after resigned his commission and took up intellectual pursuits instead. He originally wrote *The Letter* in 1829 in French. Its subsequent publication in *Telescope* seven years later prompted Tsar Nicholas I to ban the journal, declare Chaadaev to be insane and to put him under house arrest.

[20] This group included intellectuals like theological writer Alexis Khomiakov and the brothers Ivan and Peter Kireevsky, and historian Constantine Aksakov.

[21] The peasant commune in Russia was an institution of self-government in the village. The male population elected a number of elders and officials who organized the work, administered justice, issued passports, collected and allocated communal taxes owed to the landowner. It also cared for widows and orphans and even arranged marriages.

[22] For a discussion on the use of the terms "Slavophile" and "Westernizer" and the irregularities within the latter group see, for instance, W. Goerdt's article "A Cautionary Note on the Use of the Words *Westernizer* and *Slavophile* (Some Necessary Historiographical Remarks)," in *Studies in Honour of Louis Shein* (Hamilton, Canada: McMaster University, 1983),47-54.

[23] Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, 294.

[24] Quoted in Malia, 301.

[25] Ibid., 302.

[26] Ibid., 303.

[27] Herzen eloped with his cousin Natalie Zakharina while in Vladimir and his first son Alexander was born a year later.

[28] In the Russian Empire, exile was a milder form of punishment that removed a person from his or her dangerous circles and surroundings, but allowed him or her to make a living. In Herzen's case, although he and his family were relocated to Novgorod, he was a salaried worker of the government.

[29] Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, 271.

[30] Ibid., 274-77 *passim*.

[31] Malia, 230.

[32] Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, 289.

[33] Malia, 308-309.

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[34] Vera Tolz, *Russia: Inventing The Nation* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), 94.
[35] Zimmerman, ed., *Letters from France and Italy, 1847-1851* (Pittsburgh and London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 80.
[36] Ibid., 52.
[37] The Revolution in France was not monolithic. In February 1848, Louis Philippe abdicated after a workers' revolution and bitter street fighting. But an attempt to put Louis Blanc's socialism into practice was unsuccessful and by 22 June, workers set up barricades in open opposition the new government. The National Guard fired on the crowd and massacred thousands.
[38] Although these works were published abroad, they eventually found their way back to Russia.
[39]L.Navrozov, *Selected Philosophical Works.* (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1956), 370.
[40] Ibid., 373.
[41] Ibid., 377.
[42] Monica Partridge, "Alexander Herzen and England," in *Alexander Herzen: Collected Studies* (Nottingham, England: Astra Press, 1988), 145.
[43] Named for the "Great Charter" (1836) signed by millions of people, the Chartists called for democratization in England through universal manhood suffrage, annual elections, salaries of parliamentarians, among others. While in London, Herzen met Chartist Thomas Allsop who was implicated in a plot to assassinate Napoleon III. He also met Simon Bernard, Allsop's co-conspirator. The latter was acquitted at a trial Herzen attended in February 1858. See Monica Partridge, "Alexander Herzen and England,"in *Collected Studies*.
[44]Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, 523.
[45] Partridge, *Alexander Herzen*, *, 1812-1870* (Vendome, France: United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 1984),86.
[46] Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, 341; Herzen makes sweeping judgements of various nationalities, including the French, Germans, Italians, Poles, and others throughout his memoirs.
[47] Quoted in Partridge's *Alexander Herzen*, 91.
[48] Ibid., 93.
[49] Herzen first began to apply these socialist ideals in his debates with the Slavophiles. Herzen argued that his "quarrels and conversations with the Slavophiles" had "permitted the formation of sounder judgements." Indeed, it was the Slavophile influence that initiated his idealization of the peasants and his view that the "simple people" were "the future of Russia." This was already apparent in his novel *Who Is To Blame?*(1847) In it, a 16-year-old girl muses about the peasants, saying "What wonderful faces they have, open and noble! …. I cannot at all understand why the peasants of our village are better than all the guests who come to us from the provincial capital." Although Herzen had earlier insisted that Russia could only be saved through a European-wide revolution, after 1848 he refocused his intellectual lens on the potential for change that could be found in his homeland. He asserted that "the Slavs *an sich* possess the ingredients of socialism." As he argued, only the Slavic peoples could initiate socialism because "centralization is alien to the Slav spirit."
[50] Malia, 112-113.
[51] Ibid., 121.
[52] Ibid., 122.
[53] Ibid., 99-133.
[54] Ibid.321. Herzen's first positive exposure to communal living was during his visit to Italy. Italy's "municipalities" seemed to offer the best hope of liberty across Europe. Although "the government quarrels with it," Herzen wrote, "the city is a personality" and "the government treats it as a *persona moralis*."
[55] Navrozov, ed., *Selected Philosophical Works*, 484-5, 490.

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[56] Ibid., 486.
[57] Ibid., 488
[58] Ibid., 489.
[59] Alexander was not a reformer by nature, but his desire to preserve the autocracy and the state, particularly following the humiliating defeat in the Crimean War (1853-56), compelled him to implement a series of socio-economic reforms during his reign.
[60] Quoted in Partridge's *Alexander Herzen*, 101.
[61] Herzen continued to publish *The Polar Star* for the next thirteen years that made this a unique phenomenon of uncensored reading in Russia's social, political and cultural history.
[62] Quoted in Partridge's *Alexander Herzen*, 110.
[63] Chernyshevsky, a former seminarian, is best known for his novel *What Is to Be Done?* Published in 1863, the novel described truly committed activists as nihilists who were not bound by any moral code and whose terrorism against a despotic regime was justified.
[64] The son of a doctor, Belinsky lambasted the Slavophiles as champions of retrogressive ideas. In a letter to Slavophile-supporter and popular writer Nicholas Gogol (1809-1852), Herzen argued that a defense of Russia's political and social structure would only further promote Russia's backwardness vis-à-vis The West.
[65] Polish nationalists revolted against Russian domination of Poland, which had been absorbed into the Russian Empire at the end of the eighteenth century.
[66] The group responsible for the successful plot to assassinate Tsar Alexander II was 'The People's Will.' They had made a total of 11 attempts on the Tsar's life. In true dramatic irony, on the day that the Tsar Liberator had approved of a draft proposal that would have allowed for limited participation from local municipalities in discussing new laws, The People's Will assassinated the Tsar.
[67] See Partridge's article, "Alexander Herzen: His Last Phase," in *Collected Studies.*
[68] Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, 40.
[69] Ibid., 41.
[70] Isaiah Berlin, "A Marvellous Decade (Part IV): Alexander Herzen," in *Forces of Order and Movement in Europe Since 1815* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971), 131.
[71] Quoted in Ibid., 134.
[72] Ibid., 138.
[73] Malia, 405.
[74] Quoted in Isaiah Berlin, "A Marvellous Decade (Part IV): Alexander Herzen," in *Forces of Order*, 139.
[75] Quoted in Navrozov, 489.
[76] Ibid., 495.
[77] Ibid., 488.
[78] Ibid., 492.
[79] Ibid., 495. Lenin and the Bolsheviks would later take up this theme and create a communist dictatorship following the Russian Revolutions of 1917.
[80] Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, 44.
[81] Quoted in Partridge, *Alexander Herzen*, 134.
[82] Land and Liberty were one such group of revolutionaries who, since the 1870s, supported the idea of Russian socialism based on the peasant commune. They participated in the populist movement which, at its core, was concerned with propaganda and with educating the people as to their best interests. The group who assassinated Tsar Alexander II in 1881, The People's Will, came from the ranks of Land and Liberty. For more on the Russian populist movement, see for example Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth Century Russia* (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, 1960).
[83] Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts,* 38.
[84] Teryaev, G., *A.I. Herzen: Great Russian Thinker and Revolutionary Democrat.*(Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1954), 15.

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