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On Russian Populism

To the memory of Allan K. Wildman

M. ASIM KARAÖMERLIOĞLU

*I was increasingly convinced that in Populism lay the roots,
the deepest and truest origins, of contemporary Russia.*

Franco Venturi, *Studies in Free Russia*, p. 221

THE INFLUENCE of Russian Populism in and outside of Russia has been great indeed. This is due to at least three important factors. First, as Venturi points out, the study of Populism constitutes the *sine qua non* of any investigation of Russian history since it contributed to the foundation of Soviet Russia. Secondly, any elaborate understanding of Russian Marxism, which tremendously affected the course of the twentieth-century history, requires a meticulous historical account of Populism, from which Russian Marxism was born. And finally, as Venturi points out in the preface to his magnum opus, *Roots of Revolution*, Russian Populism must be regarded as part of a wider European socialist intellectual tradition.¹ Although Russian Populists usually endeavored to prove how and why Russia was different from the West, usually their arguments were reactions and responses to the political controversies then prevailing in the European socialist milieu, especially within the First International.

In this paper, I intend to problematize the widely-accepted definition of Russian Populism. Instead of a "backward-looking," peasant-oriented and class-reductionist definition, I propose to understand Russian Populism by looking at the tension between the intelligentsia and the Russian state. I shall discuss some basic features of Russian Populism in broad terms in order to understand the motivations and ideological positions of the Russian intelligentsia. In particular, I will concentrate on the work of Peter Lavrov, the highly influential Populist revolutionary of the late nineteenth century Russia. I shall also discuss

the Russian Populists' attitude towards liberal democracy and the peasant commune which constituted quite important elements of their ideology.



My analysis begins with a critique of V. I. Lenin's widely-accepted definition of Populism as elaborated and supported by Andrzej Walicki:

It was Lenin who gave it a more concrete historical and sociological connotation by pointing out that Populism was a protest against capitalism *from the point of view of the small immediate producers* who, being ruined by capitalist development, saw in it only a retrogression but, at the same time, demanded the abolition of the older, feudal forms of exploitation... It enables us to see Russian Populism as a particular variant of an ideological pattern which emerges in different backward societies in periods of transition and reflects *the characteristic class position of the peasantry*. It does not mean, of course, that Populism can be regarded as a *direct* expression of peasant ideology; it is an ideology formulated by a democratic intelligentsia who in backward countries, lacking a strong bourgeois class structure, enjoy as a rule greater social authority and play a more important part in national life than intellectuals in the economically more developed states. [Italics mine]²

In my opinion, this definition needs to be questioned, since regarding Populism as an expression of small producers or peasants traps Lenin and Walicki into class reductionism. In other words, they perceive Populism as the ideological reflection of a particular social class. Instead, I would like to propose a characterization of Populism that takes, among other things, the emergence and needs of a particular kind of intelligentsia as the constituent element of the definition.

The most valuable part of Walicki's definition above is his emphasis on the role of a democratic intelligentsia enjoying greater social authority vis-a-vis their counterparts in the so-called "developed" countries of the time. In fact, Populism cannot be understood without analyzing the birth of a new kind of intelligentsia in the nineteenth century, a worldwide phenomenon concurrent with the rise of the "modern" nation-state. Especially in countries which came late to capitalism due to the weakness of the bourgeoisie and, accordingly, to the immense role of the state, intellectuals played an important role compared to their economic power. As internal and international conditions forced the "ancien regimes" to undergo a modernization movement, the role of the intellectuals increased. It was partly because in order to survive in the international state-

system and to govern a rapidly changing society, the states had to adopt reforms such as increasing the quality and quantity of educational facilities, broadening and modernizing the state apparatus, embracing technological development, military modernization, and the like, all of which required an increase in the number of intellectuals. In this respect, intellectuals were themselves the *direct* products of the modernization process, and their future social and material status depended on its success. However, the states faced the dilemma of trying to sustain the "ancien regime" while at the same time supporting modernization efforts. Such was the case in late nineteenth-century Iran, China, Russia, Mexico and the Ottoman Empire, all of which experienced revolutionary or constitutionalist events during approximately the same decade (1905-1917). This dilemma explains not only why bureaucrats such as the Russian *Decemberists* of 1825, who were to a certain extent a member of the ruling elite of the state and yet rebelled against it, but also why the Russian intellectuals, by and large, reacted against the emergence of the bourgeoisie, perceiving them as a new power center.³

When the Russian state insisted on the preservation of many of the features of the "ancien regime," but could not embrace the intellectuals, the alienation of the latter intensified and radicalized them.⁴ This radicalization led them to search for possible allies from different strata of the society. This practical undertaking of the intellectuals explains the ambiguity and abstractness of the concept *Narod* (people), which was produced in the minds of the urban intelligentsia.⁵ Likewise, the myth created around the concept of the peasant commune can be seen as arising from the necessities of the Russian intelligentsia rather than a reflection of what the commune actually was. (I will discuss the nature of the peasant commune, *obshchina*, in detail below).

However, this is not to say that the views of the Populists represented a precapitalist outlook, although they do, to some extent. In itself, however, "backwardness" does not explain the emergence of Populism.⁶ It is important to understand the *origins* of Populism first and foremost *in its relation to the state of the "ancien" regime, not to the interests of the peasants*. An examination of Peter Lavrov's *Historical Letters* allows us to substantiate the argument above, that Populism was basically a theory reflecting the necessities and interests of the intelligentsia. His theories of the state, of critically-thinking individuals, and of the subjective nature of knowledge help to contribute to understanding the nature of Russian Populism.



Most scholars of nineteenth-century Russian history agree about the great in-

fluence which Lavrov's *Historical Letters* had on the younger generation of the 1870s. Lavrov, a highly influential Russian Populist revolutionary, in this book touches upon nearly all the significant issues of the time in regard to Populism. At the political level, *Historical Letters* must be read as a critique of Nechaevism.⁷ Unlike Serge Nechaev, a man of conspiracy and immediacy, Lavrov stressed the necessity of a long period of preparation for the education of the masses for social revolution.⁸ In other words, preparation for major historical changes rather than an immediate historical upheaval was deemed more important at the time.⁹ For this reason, the revolutionaries were to educate not only the masses but themselves as well. Secret conspiracies of a small number of professional revolutionaries could not pave the way for revolution. Lavrov insisted that the youth must be people of "learning and conviction." Since knowledge would become a revolutionary weapon in the hands of the revolutionaries.¹⁰

At the epistemological and philosophical level, Lavrov criticized both positivism and Hegelian logical abstraction. In the Russian context of the time, his critiques were directed against the nihilist Dmitry Pisarev.¹¹ Using a utilitarian point of view, he maintained that philosophical ideas "are important as forms of protest against the present in the name of a desire for a better and more just social order, or as forms of satisfaction with the present."¹² Moreover, Lavrov insisted that social scientists could not avoid ethical considerations.¹³ In that respect, he viewed social sciences as quite different from the positive sciences, basically due to the Kantian recognition that the active contribution of man to knowledge leads to a sort of relativism. To Lavrov, subjectivity in the investigation of societies was inevitable "since the investigator is himself a man and cannot for a moment detach himself from the processes which he regards as characteristic."¹⁴ Lavrov's critique of positivism must also be seen as part of a general critique of positivism in Europe, particularly in Germany, which marked a return to the subjectivity of Kant.¹⁵ Unlike most Populists such as Nicholas Chernyshevskii, Lavrov was very sensitive to the intellectual developments in Europe.¹⁶ In his focus on man, we also have to remember that Lavrov, like Chernyshevskii, was very much influenced by the anthropologism of the nineteenth century which placed man at the center of the universe.¹⁷

At the practical level, Lavrov's emphasis on subjectivity offered room for the revolutionaries to believe in their attempts to transform the world. Without it, one could hardly be convinced to take part in the endeavors to change the world. In a sense, this theoretical positioning gives impetus for "the people" to engage in revolutionary movements. Lavrov expressed the necessity of self-importance and belief in one's own historical mission. As he wrote "if the thinker believes that his moral ideal is actually realized now or will be realized in the future, he

will arrange the whole of history around the events which paved the way for this realization."¹⁸

Through Kantianism, Lavrov constituted a theory which, on the one hand, recognized the inevitable aspects of social phenomena, but on the other hand, postulated a theory of voluntarism and optimism.¹⁹

It is possible to see similar trends not only among other emigre revolutionaries but also among the others who, at the time, were inside Russia. Nicholas Mikhailovsky, for instance, in his famous *What is Progress?* stressed similar points regarding the subjective nature of sociological knowledge:

Perhaps the objective point of view, obligatory for the natural scientist, is completely unsuitable for sociology, *the object of which -man- is identical with the subject*. Perhaps, as a consequence of this identity, the thinking subject can attain to truth only when he is fully merged with the thinking object and is not separated from him even for an instant...[Italics mine]²⁰

According to Mikhailovsky, the crucial question was how to measure moral superiority. In the sphere of positivism, this is not a question since concepts like pain, pleasure, and morality are totally irrelevant to the positivist philosophy.²¹ For Mikhailovsky, however, such concepts constituted major elements in the lives of *real* men and women which could not be overlooked.

Both inside and outside of Russia, therefore, there were critiques of positivism similar to Lavrov's. There are other points within Lavrov's *Letters* that require analysis and one of the most important ideas appears at the historical level. To Lavrov, history had witnessed the unfolding dialectics between the critically-thinking individuals and the masses, or, in other words, between the scientific vanguard and the "backward masses," or between rationality and tradition.²² It was only a "cultivated minority," the critically-thinking individuals, who could grasp the knowledge of historical progress and it was their duty to transfer this knowledge somehow to the masses.²³ Interestingly enough, such an elitist perspective was not the general trend among the Populists. In Lavrov's writings one can hardly find anything exalting the masses or archaic forms of any sort. For his colleague Mikhailovsky, however, the primitive man was considered superior in many respects. Mikhailovsky compared the qualities of individuals in primitive and modern societies and found that in the primitive society the producer had direct and complete control over his own labor and means of production. In Mikhailovsky's eyes, this made the primitive individual superior and heterogeneous compared to modern-day workers. Needless to say,

Lavrov's arguments about the relation between the intellectuals and the masses were quite different.²⁴

The relationship between the critically-thinking individuals and the masses in Lavrov's work led to a very interesting conclusion on the psychological and ethical level. When intellectual privileges were gained at the expense of the material well-being of the masses, the critically-thinking individuals were obliged to repay the cost of their progress.²⁵ Lavrov intelligently and convincingly targeted his audience:

A member of a small group within the minority, who finds pleasure in his own development, in the search for truth, and in the realization of justice, would say to himself: Each of the material comforts which I enjoy, each thought which I have had the leisure to acquire or to develop, has been bought with the blood, sufferings, or toil of millions. ...I shall relieve myself of responsibility for the bloody cost of my own development if I utilize this same development to diminish evil in the present and in the future...If I am a cultivated person I am obliged to do this, but for me this obligation is very light, since it coincides exactly with what constitutes pleasure for me.²⁶

Lavrov's theory here interestingly reconciles the difficulties of the struggle and pleasure that could be gained from this struggle. It was in the seeking and disseminating the truth and thereby understanding the laws of motion of the societies and in the struggle to make the society better that one should find pleasure in life. In this individual endeavor to seek pleasure, one also coincides with the desires of the suffering majority. This coincidence, on the other hand, means that the individual endeavor to seek pleasure also leads to a collective consciousness and action.

The debt of the intellectuals, then, became the ethical motivation in the struggle for the emancipation of "the people."²⁷ Especially in the 1870s, repaying that debt became a major motivator to action for many Russian Populists. It was with this ethical appeal inspired by Lavrov that the young generations of Populists strongly took part in the revolutionary movement.²⁸ In the same manner, as Mikhailovsky argued, the debate was neither over the extent of the debt nor "over the means of liquidating it, but the debt lies on their conscience and they long to discharge it."²⁹ In the notion of repaying the debt, the Russian youth of the time found an ethical and psychological basis for their revolutionary actions.

But how could they struggle and repay the debt? Lavrov's answer is found in the section entitled "The Need for an Organized Party." In this section, we are

explicitly exposed to his theory of organization. According to Lavrov, "the voice of one man is the voice of no one."³⁰ For that reason, the unification of all the progressive forces was essential.³¹ He even drew the picture of this organization in detail:

Thus the party is organized. Its nucleus is a small number of highly developed, deliberate, vigorous people, for whom critical thinking is inseparable from action. Around them are members of the intelligentsia who are less highly developed. But the party's real foundation is its inevitable allies, the social groups suffering from the evil which the party has been organized to combat.³²

Finally, Lavrov's ideas relating to the state deserve mention. Lavrov talked about the state toward the end of *Historical Letters*. In his opinion, "progress has had to consist in the reduction of the role of the state principle in social life." However, he also talked about the possibility that the state could be used as a weapon against the enemies of progress.³³ In fact, from the ideas we encounter in *Historical Letters*, it is hard not to perceive the Jacobean dimension of Lavrov's thoughts regarding political organization. Although scholars like Philip Pomper and Venturi give accounts of Lavrov's warnings against Jacobean-like ideas, the ideas previously mentioned represent a very Jacobean position.³⁴ Such a theoretical position is also very similar to that of Lenin's in *What Is To Be Done?* As the famous Russian intellectual historian Isaiah Berlin points out, the Populists invented the conception of the party as a group of professional revolutionaries without any private lives and with strong discipline, as opposed to mere sympathizers. This conceptualization did not spring from their inclination-toward conspiracy however, but from the specific political conditions in Tsarist Russia.³⁵ In sum, regardless of whether one likes his ideas or not, Lavrov was probably the first Russian who extensively theorized the role of the intelligentsia in political struggle.

Yet, it is important to emphasize that Lavrov's position in *Historical Letters* changed as time passed, although he retained his basic principles. In the 1880s and after, as the Karakazov and Nechaev conspiracies frustrated the revolutionaries and increased the political polarization of the Russian political spectrum, Lavrov seemed to be more sympathetic to the underground extreme movements such as *Narodnaya Volya* because his emphasis on the commitment to the cause and party increased.³⁶

Furthermore, Lavrov's ideas certainly do not reflect all the variants of the Populist movement. The Populist ideas were diverse and one cannot talk about

a homogeneous ideological position as far as Populism is concerned. In a sense, Lavrov symbolized a transitional figure who was also very sensitive to the European intellectual life.³⁷ In addition to the Populist movement, he had relations with the working class through the *Northern Union of Russian Workers*. After all, it was not Georgii Plekhanov, the father of Russian Marxism, but Lavrov who represented the Russian revolutionary movement in the First International of Karl Marx.³⁸ While most of the Populists could be characterized as "economic romanticist," Lavrov thought that industrialism was necessary for Russia but it had to be less painful, without dismantling the rural structure. In this respect, he was certainly within the rationalistic tradition of the "enlighteners."³⁹ In no sense, can one characterize Lavrov as a person of "backward-looking utopianism."⁴⁰ He offers us rich historical and biographical material to see the traces of later developments in Russia such as bypassing the bourgeois stage, distrust to liberalism, and the role of the party as a vanguard.



Interestingly enough, the revolutionary Populists, especially of the 1870s, considered themselves "apolitical," since politics meant for them participating in bourgeois manipulations.⁴¹ The heart of the matter lay in their distrust and suspicion of liberal democracy. For most of the Russian Populists, liberal democracy, based on parliamentary politics, had been the direct outcome of the development of capitalism which they harshly rejected. In that respect, they perceived capitalism as a stage that could be bypassed, and so liberal democracy could also be avoided. More importantly, however, the success of liberalism would mean the atomization of individuals, the decline of solidaristic feelings, and a passive participation in bourgeois politics. In other words, if the hegemony of bourgeois ideology, understood in the Gramscian sense, were diffused to the masses, it could in turn prevent any chance of revolutionary politics. As Berlin has rightly argued, the outcome of capitalism in Russia would be the creation of "the breathing space" which "would enable the ruling class to develop a social and economic base incomparably stronger than that which it possessed at present."⁴² The Populists thought that the development of capitalism would create employment opportunities for the radical intellectuals thus leading to their political conformity. The full-fledged development of capitalism would offer special privileges and opportunities for the intellectuals and "in this way the revolutionary cause would lose its most valuable recruits."⁴³

This distrust and suspicion of liberal democracy also explain why the Popu-

lists "ignored" the political revolution, which meant for them a bourgeois revolution.⁴⁴ They were, however, ardent supporters of the social revolution, which would have resulted in a deep economic transformation of existing relations.⁴⁵

The Populists, then, were even more suspicious of liberal democracy than of the autocratic state.⁴⁶ Until the 1860s, they were naive in their expectations of political freedom secured by the state, but this naivete derived from a persuasive premise. They were aware of the fact that the state had the political capacity to transform an economically backward country. Yet if it failed to do so, it was not surprising since, after all, the "absolutely absurd and absurdly absolute" Russian state barely possessed any roots in society. In that sense, it was "hanging in the air."⁴⁷ Consequently, the strength of the state was superficial, and compared to bourgeois hegemony in the West, overthrowing merely the state hegemony would be much easier.

In Populists' attitude towards the liberal democracy, we also find the traces of the theory of "uneven development." Lavrov was well aware of this phenomenon, which was later attributed to Leon Trotsky's and Parvus's names.⁴⁸ Lavrov believed that the experiences of other societies had had an impact and influence on Russia, which meant that "backward societies could shorten the process of transition through intermediary stages of development."⁴⁹ Without experiencing liberal democracy, he demanded socialism; without the development of capitalism, he wanted Russia to secure "an honorable place among the nations of the world."⁵⁰ For the most part, the course of the Russian Revolution and the later developments in the liberal democracies of the West vindicated the Populists' position. Most of the revolutions and social upheavals of the twentieth century did take place in countries which lacked liberal democracy and perhaps because of that lack.



The year 1848 witnessed revolutionary upheavals throughout Europe and marked a turning point in the history of the Russian intelligentsia as well. As the "Spring of Nations" failed, the confidence of Russian thinkers like Alexander Herzen in the progressive mission of Europe began to fade away irreversibly. Now the attention of the Russian intelligentsia turned toward the mission of Russia in world history. To some extent, the origins of Russian Populist ideas were attempts to discover the inherent differences between Russia and Europe. As Walicki argues, Populism also "reflected ... specific problems of a backward peasant country in confrontation with the highly developed capitalist states."⁵¹ The

Populists perceived the role of the peasants, together with the existence of the peasant commune (*obshchina*) as one of the most important features prevailing in Russia and differing from the capitalist West. To analyze this "unique" feature, we have to start with the concept *Narod*, "the people."

The concept of "the people," as perceived by the Populists, constitutes both the strength and the weakness of their ideology. Their strength derived from the loose definition of the concept. Unlike the concept of class which has usually been more strictly defined, "the people," can be a sum of different social groups. The Populists argued that on the Russian soil "the people" could be defined very differently from Western concepts. According to Mikhailovsky, for instance, bourgeois liberals could never understand "the people" because they were thinking in terms of the West: "in Western Europe, after the colossal development of divergent, mutually conflicting interests, it is far more difficult than with us to clarify one's understanding of the people."⁵² In his sense, the social spectrum from which mass support could come in Russia might include diverse elements, and this situation might be an advantage for a social movement like Populism. On the other hand, the ambiguity of the concept could create programmatic difficulties since the more loosely the audience of the ideology is defined, the less it would be consistent and convincing.

Although for most of the Populists, "the people" meant the peasants, their perception of the peasants was more of an undifferentiated totality.⁵³ By the second half of the nineteenth century, it was already possible to observe considerable differentiation among the rural population, especially after the penetration of capitalist relations into the countryside and after the beginning of the gradual dissolution of the commune.⁵⁴ The Populists gave special emphasis to the role of the peasant commune because it helped them to overcome the ambiguity. The existence of the commune not only enabled them to espouse the legacy of a historical phenomenon, but it also seemed to provide an "objective" basis upon which their egalitarian and subjective perspective could stand. But what was the commune and what did the Populists see in it?

The peasant commune in Russia embodied a medieval land tenure system together with a social organization which had performed a large set of functions. Formed "spontaneously on the basis of neighborhood residence and the need for community among peasants," the commune was a combination of households, each with a small plot of land assigned on a long-term basis by the collective of the commune.⁵⁵ Ownership of the pastures and forests was collective as was the provision of services. The commune was run collectively by an assembly of the heads of households which collected taxes and redivided the ar-

able lands from time to time. This redivision was made according to the needs of the expanding families and was especially important for the egalitarianism inherent in this redistribution.⁵⁶

The commune carried in itself a dualistic structure, however. On the one hand, the commune served the interests of peasants by providing the peasantry with their vital needs and defending their interests before the state. On the other hand, it was used by the state for administrative and security reasons. The state collected taxes, recruited peasants, and held them in obedience by means of the commune. Historians have noted that as such the commune functioned as a link to the state apparatus, which not only recognized but also supported the commune." The "result was a social and functional dualism based on the contradictory tasks of the commune, and this dualism led to the formation of a dual structure —a formal (official) and an informal (unofficial) one."⁵⁷

This contradictory and complex nature of the peasant commune led the Populists believe that the commune could be used for their revolutionary purposes. It is no wonder then for the Populists, the existence of the peasant commune was important in many respects. Most significantly, the Populists believed that the peasants innately and historically experienced a collectivist life and this tradition stayed alive despite the fact that the state, the liberals, and the landowners tried to suppress it. Secondly, the commune could provide the Populists with an already-existing organization for political mobilization against the Tsar. Last but not least, the Populists perceived the commune as the nucleus of the future democratic society.

Interestingly enough, the most important ideological support for the Populists' perception of the commune came from Karl Marx. Both in his letter to Vera Zasulich and in the preface to the 1882 Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx favoured the commune, attributing special positive features to it:

Now the question is: can the Russian *obshchina*, though greatly undermined, yet a form of premedieval common ownership of land, pass directly to the higher form of Communist common ownership? ... The only answer to that possible today is this: If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that both complement each other, *the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for a communist development.* [Italics mine]⁵⁸

Marx, therefore, strongly advocated the Populists' theoretical and practical ideas about the peasant commune. To him, the commune had many superior fea-

tures. For example, it was based on locality rather than kinship, and it contained in itself contradictory property relations, communal and individual. Like the Populists, Marx maintained that although the state and the bourgeoisie were attacking and destroying the commune, it could manage to survive and enable Russia to go forward to socialism thanks to the communal habits of peasants. It is difficult to understand how Marx, as a theoretician of historical necessity, could argue in this way. While the Russian Marxists, following *Das Kapital*, were arguing about the inevitable collapse of the peasant commune and considering it a historically backward form of production, Marx himself sided with the Populists. This irony is probably related to his pragmatic and political views where Russia was concerned. Since he saw the Tsardom as a very strong base of European conservatism, anything that could harm the political authority in Russia should be supported. In other words, his position in the commune reflected his pragmatic desire to interfere with the support of Russian Tsardom to European conservative regimes. The peasant commune, if it could harm the Russian state, could be a weapon in the struggle against Tsardom which in turn could contribute to the struggle against the monarchies of Europe in general.

The emphasis on the peasant commune can be regarded as the crucial element in all variants of the Russian Populist ideology. This, however, does not mean that the Populists did not see anything negative in the commune nor did all the Populists understand the same thing from the peasant commune, and from the potentialities that the commune offered. Chernyshevskii and Lavrov, like Marx, for instance, saw the archaic aspects of the commune, but suggested that the dissolution of the commune was not inevitable since subjective struggles for its preservation could save it. For this reason, they argued that "to save the Russian commune one needs a Russian revolution."⁵⁹ Nevertheless, all the Populists thinkers, in one way or another, saw in the peasant commune something very substantial for their ideological cause. The author of *What is Progress*, Mikhailovsky, regarded the commune as something good that might prevent the development of division of labor, which he equated to capitalism. It is not that difficult to infer such a conclusion from his analysis of capitalism and from the negative feelings he attached to capitalism. Others found in the commune the reflections of the hitherto preserved positive characters of the Russian peasants in the form of inherited "instincts." According to Lavrov and his followers, for instance, the commune "could serve as the basis for a future society of small, cooperative associations, but he presumed that it was infected with the moral diseases of the old order."⁶⁰ To Lavrov, the commune should not be thought of as something that could replace the necessity for industrialization, but the prob-

lem was pursuing a kind of industrialization which would cause the least harm to the commune and take into consideration the interests of the peasants.⁶¹ After all, Lavrov thought that the peasants themselves had to undergo a process of education. Such a perspective would have been at odds with any kind of inherited "instincts" since Lavrov was trying to change most of their "inherent" characteristics by education.

The peasant commune was perceived as a base not only by the collectivist but also by the conservative and reactionary ideologies. In other words, the Populists were not the only people who supported the persistence of the commune. Ironically, many conservatives and the Tsars, to some extent, valued the commune as well. The famous Russian conservative and the theoretician of an exalted state power, Leontyev, for instance, argued interestingly about the commune when he was criticizing individualism:

...the rebels are an acute disease which has aroused a saving reaction. But those who would destroy the *village commune*, naively imagining that everything rests in the *enrichment of the individual*, are destroying the last support, the last remnants of the former alignment, stratification, serfdom, and immobility, i.e., they are annihilating one of the main conditions of both our state unity and our national-cultural isolation, and to some extent of our heterogeneous internal development as well.⁶²

For the Russian state, the commune played a role in conserving the backward features of Russian agriculture and its economic needs. As Hans Rogger points out "in addition to being an administrative and fiscal convenience, the commune became a repository for conservative hopes for rural tranquillity and for escaping the problems that a mass of landless rural proletarians would have posed."⁶³

The nature and function of the peasant commune were controversial, and ambiguous, generating tension within the Populist movement and ultimately contributing to its failure. The commune certainly was not a creation in the minds of the Populists, yet its contradictory nature, together with its perpetual change and dissolution in a time of dramatic change at the end of the nineteenth century, complicated the issue for them. The confusion about the possibilities of the commune derived from its essential dualities. On the one hand, it was a product of the feudal or precapitalist era carrying all the historical deficiencies of its times, on the other hand, some equalitarian aspects were characteristic of its organization. This duality inevitably found its reflections in the minds and characters of Russian peasants and revolutionaries.⁶⁴



From the 1890s on, the Populist ideology lost most of its support from the revolutionaries because of both its inner contradictions and the rapid socio-economic changes in Russian society. Three significant conceptual tensions were never adequately resolved: the archaic collectivism of the peasant commune in contrast to individualism; the anti-Westernism of an intelligentsia that was, in fact, a product of Westernization; and the shifting emphasis on the importance of the intelligentsia and its relation to the masses. In addition to these tensions, the late nineteenth-century Russia was undergoing deep and rapid changes. Industrialization created completely different social and political forces combined with a growing dissatisfaction among the rural population. Russia was gradually beginning to resemble to the West in the sense that it was beginning to develop an urban population with a growing middle and working classes simultaneous with the dissolution of the rural socioeconomic structure. As the famous Minister of Finance Count Witte pointed out at the time:

By the end of the 19th century, Russia had an industry which was characterized by relatively large scale factories. The interests of entire economy are closely tied to its future. This industry, however, has not yet reached such an extent and such technical perfection as to furnish the country with an abundance of cheap goods. Its services cost the country too dearly, and these excessive costs have a destructive influence over the welfare of the population, particularly in agriculture.⁶⁵

In addition to all of the above factors, practical efforts to find in the peasantry a mass base for the revolution ended in frustration in the 1870s. The peasants refused to behave as the revolutionaries expected, and even the Populists began to organize the working class, an effort at odds with their theory. This in turn confirmed the validity of the Marxist theory.⁶⁶ Indeed, it was not only the Marxists who smuggled the books of Marx and Engels into Russia. There were many other groups doing the same thing.⁶⁷ The turning point came with the 1896 textile strikes, which proved that if any revolutionary popular base was possible, it could only be found in the urban working class.⁶⁸ In other words, the 1896 strikes provided the most important single effect on the direction of the revolutionary movement in Russia. Hence, the soil was becoming more and more ripe for the Marxist propaganda which later determined the course of Russian history.

Nevertheless, revolutionary Populism is Russia's main indigenous revolu-

tionary tradition. Regardless of whether their theoretical arguments were relevant or not, the Populists managed to create a revolutionary tradition on the Russian soil out of which the cadres of Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917 were born. Although they failed to get the support of the masses, especially of the peasants, without doubt they created a revolutionary spirit and tradition among the Russian intelligentsia. Yet later in the Stalinist regime the Populist tradition was harshly denounced. Not because they were seen as advocates of "backward" social and political projects, but because they devoted themselves to truth and justice and believed in the human will or "people's will," though often naively, against the evil "objectivities" of any kind, whether Tsardom or Stalinism. Russian Populism reminds us again and again of the importance of ideas, passion, emotion, devotion, and enthusiasm in the course of history. As Lavrov put it when exalting the revolutionary spirit of his followers, "the number of those who perish is not important here: legend will always multiply it to the limits of possibility."⁶⁹ Without grasping the mentality and feeling of his assertion is it possible for us to understand and write the history of revolutions and revolutionary movements which dramatically changed the course of world history?

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NOTES

1. Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution—A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth Century Russia* (New York: The Universal Library, 1960), xxxii.
2. Andrzej Walicki, *The Controversy Over Capitalism—Studies in the Social Philosophy of the Russian Populists* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 6, 9.
3. It is not coincidental that Venturi finds many features in Russian Populism inherited from the Decemberists such as the idea of "sacrifice". Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, 2.
4. See Jack A. Goldstone, "Predicting Revolutions," *Contention* 2 (Winter 1993): 133, for a detailed essay on the tension between the state and the elites.
5. Peter Worsley, for instance, convincingly shows that Russian Populism was "pre-eminently an ideology about the peasantry, not one created by them, nor one rooted in the peasantry. It preached learning from, being guided by, the people, when everything in it was created by a segment of the urban intelligentsia." See Peter Worsley, "The Concept of Populism," in Ionescu Ghita and Ernest Gellner, eds., *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, (London: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 221.
6. For the famous explanation of the "longue-duree" of Russian historical development and its repercussions on the intellectual thought by using the notion of "backwardness", see especially Alexander Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965).
7. Philip Pomper, *Peter Lavrov and Russian Revolutionary Movement* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), 96.

8. Lavrov's emphasis on the necessity of preparation was probably influenced by the evolutionary thought, "the intellectual arch-model of the nineteenth century as prominent in the works of Darwin as in the philosophy of Spencer, the positivism of Comte, and the socialism of Fourier and Saint Simon. Evolutionism's major attraction was that it offered a combined solution to the problems of heterogeneity and change in a world in which massive change was taking place and heterogeneity was increasingly evident. The diversity of forms—physical, biological, and social—was ordered and explained by the assumption of necessary development through stages which the scientific method was to uncover." See Teodor Shanin. "Late Marx and the Russian Periphery of Capitalism." *Monthly Review* 35 (June 1983): 15.
9. Samuel H. Baron, *Plekhanov, The Father of Russian Marxism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963), 13, and Pomper, *Peter Lavrov and Russian Revolutionary Movement*, 19.
10. Peter Lavrov, "Historical Letters." in James M. Scanlan and Mary-Barbara Zeldin, eds., *Russian Philosophy*, Vol II, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 157.
11. Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, 449.
12. Lavrov, "Historical Letters", 124.
13. Pomper, *Peter Lavrov and Russian Revolutionary Movement*, 89.
14. Lavrov, "Historical Letters", 127.
15. "... neo-Kantian philosophy, which was then grappling with similar problems in Germany, as one of the sources from which he [Lavrov] drew inspiration." Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, 451.
16. I am aware of the fact that one can make a very convincing point in arguing that Chernyshevskii in fact should *not* be perceived in the intellectual tradition of Populism, but within the nihilist tradition. This depends on whether we use a narrow definition of Populism or not. At any rate, he was the outstanding political activist and his tremendous passion and ambition to transform the society at large must have resonated with the Populists. His call for the emancipation of the Russian serfs, his idea that "backwardness" may offer different avenues and opportunities, his naive expectation, like Mikhail Bakunin's, that the revolution was imminent in Russia and above all his deep hostility towards liberals and liberalism must have been welcomed by most Populists.
17. Pomper, *Peter Lavrov and Russian Revolutionary Movement*, 40.
18. Lavrov, "Historical Letters", 132.
19. Pomper, *Peter Lavrov and Russian Revolutionary Movement*, 31.
20. N. K. Mikhailovsky. "What is Progress," in *Russian Philosophy*, Vol II, eds., James M. Scanlan & Mary-Barbara Zeldin (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 182.
21. *Ibid.*, 184.
22. Pomper, *Peter Lavrov and Russian Revolutionary Movement*, 91-92.
23. Lavrov, "Historical Letters", 145-146.
24. At this point, Mikhailovsky gives the examples of the labor of the savage and of the contemporary worker. The savage was the person who enjoyed a full life in his workplace all the time. On the other hand, a worker in the "manufacture of pocket watches spends his entire life bent over the same wheels or screws or cogs and only the master watchmaker who puts the separate parts of the mechanism together knows how to do anything besides his own speciality". Mikhailovsky. "What is Progress", 178-179.
25. Lavrov, "Historical Letters", 138-144.
26. *Ibid.*, 143.
27. Pomper, *Peter Lavrov and Russian Revolutionary Movement*, 24.
28. Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, 450.
29. James H. Billington, *Mikhailovskiy and Russian Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 91.
30. Lavrov, "Historical Letters", 152.

31. Lavrov says: "So that the force will not be spent in vain, it must be organized. The critically-thinking, determined individuals must be determined not only to fight but to win; to this end it is necessary to understand not only the goal toward which one is striving but also the means by which it can be attained. If the struggle has been in earnest, those who are combating outmoded social institutions will include not only individuals who are fighting in the name of their own suffering, which they have come to understand only through the words and thoughts of others, but also individuals who have thought through the state of affairs critically. They must seek each other out; they must unite, and bring order and harmony to the disorderly elements of the historical force which has arisen. Then the force will be organized; its action can be focused on a given point, concentrated for a given purpose." Lavrov, "Historical Letters", 154
32. *Ibid.*, 156.
33. *Ibid.*, 167-68.
34. In order to substantiate his argument, Pomper quotes the following sentences from Lavrov: "We place at the forefront the proposition that the reconstruction of Russian society must be accomplished not only with the people's happiness as its goal, not only for the people, but by means of the people." Pomper, *Peter Lavrov and Russian Revolutionary Movement*, 146 and see Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, 466.
35. Berlin, "Introduction," in Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, xxv.
36. Pomper, *Peter Lavrov and Russian Revolutionary Movement*, 212.
37. *Ibid.*, 79 & Walicki, *The Controversy Over Capitalism*, 36-7.
38. *Ibid.*, 152 & 216.
39. Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, 459 & Walicki, *The Controversy Over Capitalism*, 27.
40. *Ibid.*, 37.
41. Walicki, *The Controversy Over Capitalism*, 82.
42. Berlin, "Introduction", xiv.
43. *Ibid.*, xiv.
44. It was Chernishevskii who was "largely responsible for the fact that 'liberal' became a term of opprobrium in advanced circles." See Avrahm Yarmolinsky, *Road to Revolution* (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1959), 98.
45. Walicki, *The Controversy Over Capitalism*, 81.
46. *Ibid.*, 83.
47. Especially Peter Tkachev maintained such a position firmly. See *Ibid.*, 98.
48. Alexander Helphand, most often known by his nickname Parvus, was a Russian Jewish who actively took part in the 1905 Revolution. He was the first to develop the theory of "permanent revolution" based on "uneven development." Parvus later became involved in political movements in Germany and the Ottoman Empire. For more information on Parvus, see Z. A. B. Zeman and Winfried B. Scharlau, *The Merchant of Revolution; the Life of Alexander Israel Helphand (Parvus) 1867-1924* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), and Oleg F. Solov'ev. "Parvus: Politicheskii Portret," *Novaia i Noveishaia Istoriiia* 1991: 162-185.
49. Pomper, *Peter Lavrov and Russian Revolutionary Movement*, 214.
50. Walicki, *The Controversy Over Capitalism*, 129.
51. *Ibid.*, 26.
52. Mihailovsky quoted in Billington, *Mikhailovsky and Russian Populism*, 90.
53. Abraham Ascher. *Pavel Axelrod and the Development of Menshevism* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1972), 40.
54. Hans Rogger, *Russia in the Age of Modernization and Revolution 1881-1917* (New York: Longman, 1983), 108.
55. Boris Mironov. "The Peasant Commune After the Reforms of the 1860s," in Ben Eklof and Stephen P. Frank, eds., *The World of the Russian Peasant, Post-Emancipation, Culture and Soci-*

- ety, (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 10.
56. Shanin, "Late Marx and the Russian Periphery of Capitalism", 13
 57. Mironov, "The Peasant Commune After the Reforms of the 1860s," 10.
 58. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto, With an Introduction by A. J. P. Taylor*, (Middlesex: Penguin, 1985), 56.
 59. Berlin, "Introduction:; xv. For Lavrov, see Walicki, *The Controversy Over Capitalism*, 58.
 60. Pomper, *Peter Lavrov and Russian Revolutionary Movement*, 180.
 61. "The position of the Populist economists of the eighties was characterized not so much by opposition to industrialization as such, but rather by a search for a distinctive, non-capitalist model of industrialization, a model which would take account of the interests of peasantry and of the specific features of the economic situation of Russia as a backward agrarian country in co-existence with the developed capitalist countries." Walicki, *The Controversy Over Capitalism*, 114.
 62. Constantine Leontyev, "The Average European as an Ideal and Instrument of Universal Destruction," in James M. Scanlan and Mary-Barbara Zeldin, eds., *Russian Philosophy*, Vol II, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1965), 276.
 63. Rogger, *Russia in the Age of Modernization and Revolution 1881-1917*, 80.
 64. Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, 71.
 65. Witte quoted in Rogger, *Russia in the Age of Modernization and Revolution 1881-1917*, 108.
 66. Allan K. Wildman, *The Making of a Workers' Revolution, Russian Social Democracy, 1891-1903* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), 32-33. When Axelrod was still a Populist, he accepted to work for the Northern Union of Russian Workers which was founded in 1878 in St. Petersburg. See Ascher, *Pavel Axelrod and the Development of Menshevism*, 42.
 67. Baron, *Plekhanov, The Father of Russian Marxism*, 135.
 68. Ascher, *Pavel Axelrod and the Development of Menshevism*, 127.
 69. Lavrov, "Historical Letters", 153.