ALEXEI A. KARA-MURZA

Herzen: In Search of the Russian Personality

The author clarifies the attitudes of Herzen as a Westernizer of a special kind, a consistent liberal and democrat, and a defender of the historical role of the peasant commune.

For those whose lives have been connected with the philosophy building at 14 Volkhonka* (whether venerable scholars of the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences or young students of the university), Alexander Herzen is a special figure. It was precisely here, on Volkhonka, at the city garden estate of Prince Sergei Golitsyn that in 1834-35 the young Herzen was compelled, regularly over a period of many weeks, to attend the investigation of the Special Commission—created by supreme decree—on the Issue of Unreliable Youth. The chair-

*For more than eight decades, the historical building at 14 Volkhonka Street in Moscow has housed the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IFRAN), the leading philosophy research institution and one of the most significant intellectual centers of the Russian Federation. For more on the history of the building as well as on IFRAN, see my introductory article “The House on Volkhonka” in a special issue devoted to the eightieth anniversary of the Institute of Philosophy: Russian Studies in Philosophy, Summer 2009, vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 3-11.—Ed.
Europe or non-Europe?

In his early work *The Twenty-eighth of January* [Dvadtsat' vos'moe ianvaria] (1833), the young Herzen already asked himself the crucial question for the indentification of Russia as a civilization: "Do the Slavs belong to Europe?" His answer was unequivocal: "It seems to us that they do belong to Europe, for they have a right to Europe equal to that of all the tribes that came to inflict the death blow upon decrepit Rome and torment Byzantium in its agony; for they are tied to Europe with a powerful tie—Christianity; for they spread over Europe from Asia to Scandinavia and Venice."

But then there arose of necessity another question: if there exists a genetic kinship between the Slavs and Europe, then whence came such a great and striking difference between present-day Russia and Europe? In the same work of 1833, Herzen develops the thought that it is a matter of Russia lagging considerably behind Europe in time, as a result not only of unfavorable factors in its own development but also of extraordinarily favorable factors in the development of Europe. Among the latter Herzen, who was then under the influence of classical German dialectics, especially highlighted the circumstance that—unlike Russia—Europe was developing under conditions of the clash of diverse contradictions that "struck the sparks of progress." "Hitherto the development of Europe has been a constant struggle between the barbarians and Rome, between popes and emperors, between victors and vanquished, between the lords and the people, between the kings and the lords, communes, and peoples, and finally between the property owners and the propertyless. But humanity must remain in struggle until it reaches the point at which it can live a full life, until it enters the human phase, the phase of harmony, or else it must stagnate as a mystical East. In this struggle was born the middle condition that expresses the principle of the fusion of opposing elements—enlightenment, Europeanism." 1

And so it is only in the struggle of contradictions that there emerge progress, enlightenment, Europeanism, a developed civilization.

Thus, the duality of Russia consisted in the fact that while part of European civilization in terms of origin it had lost its historical dynamism, "taken form slowly and late," failed to develop into Europe. Due to the special characteristics of its geographical position ("enormous extension over the earth") and history, Russia was more inclined toward "Eastern contemplative mysticism" and "Asiatic stasis": "In the system of appanage principalities there was opposition to the sovereign neither from the communes nor from the landowners. . . . The two centuries under the Tatar yoke helped Russia merge into a single whole, but again did not produce opposition. The autocracy was established—and there was still no opposition."

Herzen would subsequently develop this same idea of the one-sidedness and lack of productive contradiction in Russian life in his work "On the Development of Revolutionary Ideas in Russia" [O razvitii revoliutsionnykh idei v Rossii] (1851): "In the Slavic character there is something womanly; this clever and strong race, richly endowed with diverse capabilities, is deficient in initiative and energy. There seems to be nothing in the nature of the Slavs to arouse them; it is as though they are waiting for an external impulse."

Peter the Great—"the barbarian enlightener"

It was precisely here that the young Herzen found the clue to that powerful civilizational impulse which Russian society received from the transformations of Peter the Great—a man "with the appearance and spirit of a semi-barbarian" but "brilliant and unshakable in his great intention to bring his country into the mainstream of human development." The genius of Peter, according to Herzen, consisted precisely in that he was the first to *generate opposition in Russia*—in his own person: "Peter appeared! He entered into opposition to the people, embodied Europe in himself, set himself the task of transferring Europeanism into Russia, and devoted his life to its accomplishment."

It is customary to think that for a long time Herzen was one of the leaders of the "Westernizing party" in Russia. But it seems to me that Herzen's initial choice of "Westernism" was for him not so much a lever of one-sided and total victory over the adherents of Russian uniqueness [samobytniki] as a means for most effectively solving the problem of finding a productive synthesis of "innovation" and "tradition" in Russia. After all, it was not for nothing that Herzen repeatedly emphasized the biunial character of the "Westernizer-Slavophile" complex and the profound commonality that united the "friend-enemies": "Their heads faced in different directions, but there was one heart." By all appearances, what the early Herzen disliked in the "Slavophiles" was by no means their defense of "tradition" as such, but rather their unconstructive stress on reviving a dead and mythologized tradition, their inability to
find a constructive resolution to the potentially life-giving contradic­
tion between tradition and innovation. The Westernizer Herzen did not
conceal his main complaint against Slavophilism: he saw it as "instinct"
and "insulted people's feeling" rather than fully fledged "doctrine," let
alone "theory." So for Herzen "Westernism" too meant not so much a
party seeking one-sided advantage as a path—a more conscious (that is,
 rational) path than that of the Slavophiles—toward achieving a produc­tive
integral formula in the conflict between tradition and innovation.
For the initial premise of the Russian Westernizers, in Herzen's opinion,
is historically indisputable: "The knout, the cudgel, and the lash long
predate the Spiessrute and the Fuchtel"* And so the final goal of the
"Europeans" is also more comprehensible and fruitful: "The Europeans
... did not want to exchange the collar of German slavery for the collar
of Orthodox-Slavic slavery; they wanted to throw off all possible col­
lars." Thus, we already find in the young Herzen a sharply formulated
critique of the reformer Peter, whose practice of "fighting barbarism by
means of barbarism" was incapable of bringing about the sought-after
"human freedom." Forcible Westernization or Europeanization "raw
under the knout" leads, according to Herzen, not to freedom but to the
loss of the last remnants of Russian freedom. Hence his conclusion:
The forcible imposition of Europe on Russia has not led to a European
result—the freedom of the individual. Just as Russians were previously
ruled by the lack of choice under "Asiatic despotism," so now the
lack of choice under the reformers destroys the possibility of life-giving
dialogue between the old and the new and paralyzes the emergence of
the Russian individual.

But while Peter did at least subject Russia to a very complex cultural
experiment with some chance of a beneficial outcome, his less talented
and creative successors quickly squandered Peter's legacy. Instead of
correction that was nonetheless imposed in the name of enlightenment, all
that remained of Peter's design was naked, meaningless coercion. In his
work Young and Old Russia [Molodaia i staraia Rossiia] (1862), Herzen
demonstrates the final degeneration of post-Petrine statehood—not only
under the tyranny of Nicholas I but also during the convulsions of Alex­
ander II: "In St. Petersburg terror, the most dangerous and senseless of
all terrors, the terror of dumb cowardice, the terror not of a lion but of a
calf—a terror in which a government out of its wits, knowing not whence
danger comes, knowing neither its own strength nor its own weakness
and therefore ready to fight for nothing is assisted by society, literature,
the people, progress, and regression."

The path to Europe: temptations and traps

Herzen was a nonstandard thinker in the sense that although he was
certainly a Europeanist in his cultural preferences, he was not afraid
to point out the costs and dangerous consequences of the coercive and
therefore superficial Europeanization of Russia. Herzen's rejection of
straightforward Westernism did not signify his defection to the Slavophile
camp. Unlike the Slavophiles, Herzen remained to the end of his life a
sharp critic of pre-Petrine Russia. The chief criterion of his appraisals
was always the same—whether or not "freedom of the individual" existed
in a society: "With us the individual has always been crushed, absorbed,
he has never even tried to emerge."—wrote Herzen in his work From the
Other Shore [S togo berega] (1849). "Free speech with us has always
been considered insolence, independence, subversion; man was engulfed
in the state, dissolved in the community."* But even Peter's imposition
of European ways from above did not lead to any substantial expansion
of personal freedom in Russia. Herzen formulated a celebrated paradox
that Russian anti-Westernizers were later to put to very frequent use
but that only showed the consistent liberalism of Herzen, who placed
"humaneness" above formal affiliation to the Westernizing party. In his
opinion, the human individual in Russia had been hemmed in by two
forms of unfreedom—the coercive Asiatic despotism of old Muscovy
and the equally coercive Europeanism of post-Petrine Russia.

In the enormous literature on Herzen, it is always said that a key mo­
ment in the evolution of his political views was his "disillusionment with
Europe" What then was it that so unpleasantly struck the Westernizer
Herzen when he encountered the real Europe? He himself wrote about
this in his work Ends and Beginnings [Kontsy i nachala] (1862), and

* The Spiessrute was a long supple switch; the Fuchtel was a rapier or sword with
a wide blade. Blows with the Spiessrute and with the flat side of the Fuchtel were
customary punishments in the Prussian army.—Trans.
his mood reveals the indubitable liberal within him: "With a mixture of horror and revulsion, I gazed at the constantly moving, swarming crowd and felt a foreboding of how it would take away from me my half-seat in the theater or stage-coach, how it would throw itself like a wild beast into railroad cars, how it would heat and satiate the air. . . . Like commodities, people were becoming somehow herdlike, wholesale, ordinary, cheaper, and flatter taken separately, but more numerous and stronger en masse. Individualities were being lost in the general flood, like the drops in a waterfall." In fact, Herzen had caught the first whiffs of the approaching totalitarian forms of society that would emerge where European principles of freedom lost their immunity under the onslaught of "mass society." His reflections, incidentally, were resonant with the apprehensions of the European liberals themselves—for example, Herzen's contemporary John Stuart Mill. In his celebrated essay "On Liberty," Mill comes to the conclusion that in the development of each European nation it seems that there is a limit beyond which it "will tend to become another China." According to both Mill and Herzen, the cultural simplification of Europe, a life filled not with creative strivings but with "empty interests" leads toward "a new China." Philistine civilization, losing its former impulse to development, may lead to the complete elimination of the human individual, universal leveling—something like the old "Asiatic" despotism.

In essence, Herzen became one of the first European thinkers to criticize—long before Jose Ortega y Gasset, Erich Fromm, and Hannah Arendt—the phenomena that would later be called the "flight from freedom" and whose triumph would eventually give birth to European forms of authoritarianism and totalitarianism. As it turns out, being a Europeanist does not mean unrestrainedly praising "any kind of Europe." Responsible Europeanism is, rather, criticism of the existing Europe from the point of view of the fundamental cultural principles of Europe—above all, the principles of "freedom of the individual" and personal dignity. Herzen himself understood very well that his gradually hardening critical attitude toward the West might play into the hands of the opponents of Russian Europeanism, but intellectual honesty was for him a supreme value: "I know that my view of Europe will be badly received in our country. In order to console ourselves, we want a different Europe and believe in it in the same way that Christians believe in heaven. Destroying dreams is in general an unpleasant business, but I am compelled by some sort of inner force that I cannot vanquish to tell the truth—even in those cases where it is harmful to me." Herzen, however, continued to the end of his life to value Europe precisely for this—for the chance freely to tell the truth. Even in 1849, at the start of his life in emigration, in From the Other Shore, he explains to his friends why he consciously chooses Europe: "[I]t is not happiness, not distraction, not rest, not even personal safety that I have found here; . . . I stay because the struggle is here, because despite the blood and tears it is here that social problems are being decided, because it is here that suffering is painful, sharp, but articulate. The struggle is open, no one hides. . . . For the sake of this open struggle, for this free speech, this right to be heard—I stay here." Herzen proceeds to formulate a principle that he proclaimed throughout his life and that allows us to speak of his indubitable adherence to the liberal idea: "The liberty of the individual is the greatest thing of all, it is on this and on this alone that the true will of the people can develop. Man must respect liberty in himself, and he must esteem it in himself no less than in his neighbour, than in the entire nation."***

**Between liberalism and democracy**

Herzen drew a fundamental distinction between "democracy" and "philistineism." The well-known complaints of Herzen, who was simultaneously a liberal and a democrat, against the conservative liberals reduced to the accusation that the latter were unwilling to democratize their liberal convictions and in fact connived at "philistineization" and the "new Chinese stasis." Yes, argued Herzen, there had been times when only the educated minority demanded freedom of the individual, and at those times liberal aristocratism had been natural and justified: "I am not a moralist, I am not sorry for the twenty generations of Germans who were wasted in order to make Goethe possible, and am glad that the feudal dues of Pskov made it possible to rear Pushkin."***

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But the defenders of the privileges of a narrow minority (including the privilege of freedom) found themselves at a dead end, in confusion and disarray, when there appeared on the historical stage—"the worker with his axe and his blackened hands, hungry and half-naked in rags—not as he appears in books or in parliamentary chatter or in philanthropic verbiage, but in reality. This 'unfortunate brother' about whom so much has been said, on whom so much pity has been lavished, finally asked what was to be his share in all these blessings, where were his freedom, his equality, his fraternity?"

Herzen, without abandoning his liberal convictions (based, as before, upon "freedom of the individual"), was willing to accept this challenge of democratism—"political Don Quixotes" like Giuseppe Garibaldi and Giuseppe Mazzini had always been his ideal of public service.

However, Herzen's Russian opponents—statist liberals like Konstantin Kavelin and Boris Chicherin—preferred to guard the freedoms of the elite, now not only against tyranny from above but also against the encroachments of the awakened masses. The result of this conflict within the liberal camp is well known—the liberals managed to preserve neither democracy nor liberalism in Russia.

**Socialism versus Asiatic despotism**

Although many have argued otherwise, Herzen’s conception of "Russian socialism" in no way separated him from the Russian-European liberal tradition. On the contrary, Herzen's "socialism"—as he understood it—was a means of safeguarding "freedom of the individual," a form in which civilization might be defended against the assault of a "new Chinese regime." It is very characteristic that in many of his works Herzen should place "Russian socialism" alongside "the American model." He repeatedly expresses the idea that in order to be saved European civilization must obtain a new impulse from the young, fresh nations: "We make no prophecies; but nor do we think that the future of man is tied exclusively to Western Europe. If Europe does not manage to raise itself by means of social transformation, then other countries will transform themselves; there are among them some that are already prepared for this movement, while others are preparing themselves for it." Herzen did not doubt that one of these young nations to which the future belonged was the United States of America; another, possibly, would be Russia—"full of strength, but at the same time full of savagery."

And so, while Herzen was disillusioned with the Europe of his day, it is by no means true that he renounced the principles of "freedom of the individual," as has been claimed by his Bolshevik and other anti-Westerner interpreters. Herzen was drawn into the general European crisis of life and consciousness and he, together with Western thinkers, persistently looked for ways out of the crisis, for it was his deep conviction that the outcome of the struggle between the "old Europeanism" and the "new Chinese regime" was by no means predetermined. The salvation or final loss of the principle of individuality was a probabilistic process, and Herzen repeatedly emphasized that everything depended on the ability of free individuals to withstand the pressure of their environment and coercive leveling.

**Feeling pain for the Russian person**

Herzen's reflections concerning the fate of Europe were always an expression of the pain he felt at the "colossal deformities" to which the human individual was subjected in Russia. These motifs are especially clear in *From the Other Shore*. However, Herzen's words, written a century and a half ago, are fully applicable to Russia in the twentieth century—and, indeed, in no small degree to Russia today: "We grew up under the terror, under the black wings of the secret police, in its very claws; we were crippled by its merciless oppression; and just managed to survive. . . . Thirsty for knowledge, we listen at keyholes, we try to peer through chinks.... Is it so strange that after this we are unable to organize either the inner or the outer life, that we demand too much, sacrifice too much, scorn the possible, are indignant because what is impossible scorns us. We rebel against the natural conditions of life, and submit to every kind of arbitrary nonsense."

As a result, Herzen thought, the predominant type in Russia had become the "pseudo-Europeans"—the people whom he often called "amphibians" and whose chief distinguishing mark as a species was their inability either to preserve Russian tradition or to absorb Western civilization. In his late *Letters to an Opponent* [Pis'ma k protivniku] (1865), Herzen observed that as a result of the orientation of the Russian

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**Ibid., p. 24. (In Russian: Ibid., p. 239.)—Ed.
autocacy toward "Prussian models" the worst qualities of the German
had acquired hypertrophied and dangerous expression in Russia: "In the
philistine wretchedness of German life the sergeant majors' corps had
nowhere to stretch its limbs; on the black soil of Russia, thanks to the
landowners' hardness, it quickly developed until the coffin was nailed
tight and the music jingled in the horses' spurs." Herzen defined the es-
sence of the ruling class in Russia as a fusion of the "German bureaucrat"
with the "Byzantine eunuch."

In Herzen's opinion, a no less dangerous type of individual was matur-
ing within the milieu of the Russian opposition. His mournful appraisals
of the mutilated Russian individual forced Herzen to ask the question:
then who in Russia, under such conditions, was capable of assuming
the initiative of emancipation? He was very worried by the emerging type
of person who was absolutely "superfluous" in the present and who for
precisely this reason was often willing to trample everything underfoot
in his zealous striving for "the future." Herzen called this new breed of
Russian, who had appeared in the period of stagnation under Nicholas I,
"bilious people" [zhelechviki]: "The first things in them that struck us
were the malicious joy of their negation and a terrible pitilessness. . . .
Where the likes of us would halt, rub ourselves to restore sensation, and
look to see whether there might not be a spark of life, they would push on
through the wilderness of logical deduction and easily reach those sharp
final solutions that frighten us by their radical glibness. In general, the
Russian enjoys a frightening advantage over the European in reaching
such conclusions—he has no tradition, no kin, no custom."

Thus, the problem, according to Herzen, was that the new type of
Russian oppositionist was a direct result of the forcible—and therefore
superficial and unreliable—Europeanization of Russia: 'The person who
passes most safely along dangerous roads is he who carries neither oth-
ers' luggage nor his own. Those thus liberated from all tradition were not
healthy young natures but people whose hearts and souls had been broken
to pieces. . . . Why be surprised that youngsters who escaped from this
cave were foolish and sick?" Herzen greatly feared that precisely these
"new people," who in Russia had "nothing to lose," would soon begin to
shape the future of the country. Unfortunately, he was not mistaken.

Is there salvation?

In what direction does Herzen look for an escape from the clutches
of pseudo-Europeization? His Europeanist persona does not accept
a return to the past, to pre-Petrine Muscovy. After all, "the knout, the
cudgel, and the lash long predate the Spiessrute and the Fuchtel." But
nor does Herzen want to be driven forward along the road chosen by "the
civilizer with a knout in his hand who persecutes all enlightenment." And
he arrives at a nontrivial conclusion: it is necessary to return—not, how-
ever, to the "savage forms" of pre-Petrine Russia, but to its transformed
"human content." In place of the willful effort of the "reformer-tsar,"
whom the early Herzen sincerely considered an adequate substitute for
the European Reformation ("in our country a whole revolution, bloody
and horrifying, was replaced by the genius of a single man"), must come
an authentic Reformation as a reinterpretation of national origins—
grassroots democracy, warped neither by "Tatar" nor by "German"
accretions. In fact, it is precisely this Russian Reformation that Herzen
calls "Russian socialism."

Only in this context is it possible to understand Herzen's attitude to-
ward the Russian commune. In the complexity of Herzen's position we
find the clue to the puzzling fact that within a few decades the activists
of the Russian zemstvo movement* would be able with every right to
count Herzen among the founders of the "liberal zemstvo"

Herzen never idealized the commune, but he could not fail to observe
that the commune, for all its defects and even vices, was virtually the
sole institution that in all the dramatic collisions of Russian history had
proven capable of preserving remnants of "freedom of the individual." In
his work The Russian People and Socialism [Russkii narod i sotsializm]
(1851), Herzen enumerated these indubitable contributions of the Rus-
sian commune to the cause of safeguarding the individual against the
onslaught of external coercive forms: "The commune has preserved the
Russian people from Mongol barbarism, from Imperial civilization from
the superficially Europeanized landowners and the German bureaucracy:
the organic life of the commune has persisted despite all the attempts
made on it by authority."** And in his well-known Letters to Linton
[ Pis'ma Lintonu] (1854) Herzen gave the clearest formulation of those
principles which the Russian commune had a chance (a chance—no
more!) to realize in order ultimately to ensure the free development of
the individual. The main point here is that for Herzen the commune was a

*The movement for autonomous provincial government.—Trans.
** Alexander Herzen, From the Other Shore and The Russian People and Social-
ism, pp. 185-86. (In Russian: Gertsen, Sobr. soch. v 301, [Moscow: Nauka, 1954-64]),
vol. 6, pp. 447-49.)—Ed.
possible foundation for "humanized property" and for popular grassroots self-government and representation—a model that it was then necessary to extend to the whole of society.

Herzen's reliance on communal self-government as the prototype of a future nationwide civil society proved unviable. But this was yet another attempt to answer general questions that trouble Russian liberals. How is Russia to pass between the Scylla of reaction and the Charybdis of revolution? How are the human individual and his dignity to be safeguarded during this passage? Herzen's "third way" has not been realized. However, the same is true of all other liberal proposals.

Alexander Ivanovich Herzen was indeed absolutely Russian. Despite his genius, the brilliant definition of the Russian character that he himself formulated fully applied to him: "we want alchemy, magic, but life and nature go their ways indifferent, submitting to man only to the extent to which he has learnt to work by their very methods."*

Notes

3. Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 79-80.
5. Gertsen, *Sotch. v 2 t.,* vol. 1, p. 81.
7. Ibid., vol. 8, p. 143.
8. Ibid., vol. 8, p. 129.
12. Ibid., vol. 8, p. 52.

* Alexander Herzen, *From the Other Shore,* p. 25. (In Russian: Gertsen *Sobr soch v8t.* 3, p. 240.)—Ed.

VALENTIN V. LAZAREV

A Metaphysical Perspective on Herzen's Drawing Closer to Slavophilism

The author examines the nature of Herzen's relationship with Slavophilism in its conflict with Westernism and discusses his incipient religiosity.

In the immense theme of the worldview of Alexander Ivanovich Herzen, the question of his attitude toward Westernism and Slavophilism continues to play a significant role for historians of Russian philosophy. The first rush of enthusiasm for Western civilization as a model for imitation has passed, and the Russian Westernizer has undergone a profound disillusionment with the philistine Western Europe that he has directly encountered in emigration. The West, he is convinced, falls infinitely short of its own ideals and is organically incapable of embodying the lofty principles that it has itself proclaimed—the principles of the Great French Revolution. He has started to place all his hopes on Russia. He has not renounced Western ideals, but he now perceives that the West has abandoned and betrayed them and that it is Russia's mission to realize

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