Russian Thinkers Study Guide

Russian Thinkers by Isaiah Berlin

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Russian Thinkers is a collection of essays by the famed British political philosopher and professor or Russian studies, Isaiah Berlin. The essays appeared in various journals from the 1940's through the 1960's. The essays, collected and edited by Russian scholars Henry Hardy and Aileen Douglas, focus on the history and thinking of the major Russian thinkers, social theorists, critics and novelists of the nineteenth century. They range from novelists such as Leo Tolstoy, Feodor Dostoevsky and Ivan Turgenev, to critics and aesthetes such as Vissarion Belinsky, to agitators such as Mikhail Bakunin and populist revolutionaries such as Nikolay Chernyshevsky.

Berlin draws attention to overlooked Russian writers and thinkers, or to overlooked themes in the work of well-known writers. The book includes his most famous essay, "The Hedgehog and the Fox," which addresses Leo Tolstoy's philosophy of history as revealed in his great historical novels, especially War and Peace. The distinction Berlin draws, between "hedgehogs," who know "one big thing" and "foxes," who know "many different things" (borrowed from a fragment of the Greek philosopher Archilocus), is, in fact, central to most of the essays in this book and to Berlin's thinking as well. Berlin sees the conflict between the "fox" (like love of concrete reality and the details of real life) and the "hedgehog" (like love of grand overarching visions and goals) as central to Russian intellectual life in the nineteenth century. Berlin's favorite writers and thinkers, such as Turgenev, Herzen and Tolstoy, live with the unresolvable conflicts between these and other values, such as individualism vs. collectivism. They mostly refuse to succumb to the temptations of trying to find false solutions or to escape in revolutionary action or Utopian schemes, in contrast to revolutionary agitators such as Bakunin or populists such as Chernyshevsky.

In fact, tension between "foxes" and "hedgehogs" runs throughout Russian culture, not just Russian writers. The destructive critics of the 1860's and 1870's, as embodied in Turgenev's "nihilist" Bazarov, were "clearing the ground" for some new social reality, although many of them could not say what that would be. Of course, we readers in the twenty-first century know that the Communists erected the Soviet Union in 1917, an awareness that forms the necessary background of all these essays. The tension between foxes and hedgehogs may be an inescapable tension in human existence itself. Berlin's liberal humanism, like that of Herzen and Tolstoy, consists in part of acknowledging suffering in the face of human problems that can't be solved, while maintaining a commitment to social justice, equality and progress despite difficulties and setbacks. This is the central theme he probes in the work of the Russian thinkers and writers he uncovers and explores.

Russia and 1848

Russia and 1848 Summary and Analysis

After the Decembrist rebellion of 1825, the once-liberal Tsar Nicholas I Romanov moved away from his earlier sympathy for reform. After the failed European revolutions of 1848, in Sicily, France, Italy and Austria (and one in Hungary in 1849, which Russian troops crushed), Nicholas increasingly saw himself as the defender of autocracy, religion and order against atheism, liberalism and revolution - not only in Russia, but for all of Europe. He repressed all signs of dissent and unorthodoxy and halted all plans for reform. Some authors, such as Nikolai Gogol, became supporters of autocracy and even presented serfdom as divinely ordained. The repression of the period from 1848 to 1855 (when Nicholas died) was "the darkest hour in the night of Russian obscurantism in the nineteenth century." In a double censorship system, a royal committee dubbed the "Second of April committee" examined works that had already been allowed to publish by other censors, in one case condemning a poem that had been approved by the Tsar himself! The only conspiracy uncovered by the Tsar's political police was the Petrashevsky Circle, a discussion group of radical intellectuals. At their trial, circle member Feodor Dostoevsky was sentenced to internal exile in Siberia.

The situation in Russia in the 1830's and '40's was more like that of Europe in the mid-to-late eighteenth century than that of Europe at the same period. Russia had no organized opposition parties, extensive middle class, large pool of industrial workers, or organized workers' or peasants' parties. While the failed 1848, revolutions created despair and disillusion among western European intellectuals, in Russia they hardened the opposition and drove it in upon itself. The "moral quarantine" of Western ideas isolated Russian intellectuals, heightening Slavophilia and opposition to Western liberalism. Uncompromising radicals such as the critic Vissarion Belinsky became more influential than moderates such as Alexander Herzen - especially since Herzen spent the second half of his life in Paris. The ultimate effect of the post-1848, repressions was to make the radicals more uncompromising.

The Hedgehog and the Fox

The Hedgehog and the Fox Summary and Analysis

The Greek philosopher Archilochus said in a fragment: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." "Foxes" are dedicated to the multiplicity and concreteness of experience, while "hedgehogs" interpret life in terms of some grand abstract design or pattern. Leo Tolstoy was "a fox who believed in being a hedgehog." In his novels he presented life in its concrete multiplicity, not according to some overarching pattern or design. But he frequently felt guilty about not having an overarching vision and spent his last years as a moral preacher rather than a novelist.

Critics often dismiss Tolstoy's theorizing, while praising his skills as a novelist and chronicler of the details of human experience. But Tolstoy's philosophy of history in War and Peace has been underestimated by his critics, right and left. Tolstoy was torn by conflicts that run throughout the history of social thought in nineteenth century Russia. On the one hand, he was intensely devoted to the belief that only concrete individual life was accessible to human knowledge and reason. All attempts to find grand designs or logical patterns in history were futile. This was true not because history had some ineffable or divine essence, but simply because no human being can know all the actions and causes that go into even one event, such as the Napoleonic battles chronicled in War and Peace.

Tolstoy's views share much with those of Joseph de Maistre, an educated courtier and envoy of the kingdom of Savoy to Russia, who bitterly attacked Enlightenment notions of progress and reason in several books and collections of letters. Even though Maistre was a Roman Catholic reactionary, while Tolstoy always considered himself a liberal and rationalist, both men share a thoroughgoing rejection and suspicion of any total vision of human experience that pretended to completeness or spurious authority (except, in Maistre's case, for Catholic doctrine). In the end, Tolstoy suffered greatly from being a fox who believed he ought to be a hedgehog.

Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty

Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty Summary and Analysis

Despite differences of temperament and gifts, both Alexander Herzen and Mikhail Bakunin placed individual liberty at the center of their writing and activism. Herzen was the most effective publicist of the nineteenth century, while Bakunin exercised a powerful, personal magnetism despite more limited literary ability. Yet despite his revolutionary earnestness and influence on the tradition of political conspiracy, Bakunin expressed no new or original ideas. Behind a dazzling, and seemingly careless, prose style, Herzen was a moral and political thinker of first importance, and his ideas deserve more attention than they have yet received.

Herzen's world was dominated by French and German romanticism, which developed partly to explain the failures of the French Revolution. Hegel's philosophy saw societies and institutions as possessing an inner "spiritual" core, which the eighteenth-century rationalists had neglected. Human societies were not mere groups of individuals, but spiritual realities in themselves. Progress was a movement of spiritual forces that enlightened individuals should try to understand and cooperate with. Hegel saw the movement in the growth of the state, Herder in the development of races and tribes, while Mazzini and Michelet saw the movement in the growth of national cultures. All agreed that the universe obeys a pattern that could, in principle, be discovered and followed.

Herzen violently rejects this vision of an inexorable future. To him, nature obeys no plan and history follows no "libretto." There are no short cuts to understanding human experience, and some human problems may have no solution. Although Herzen wanted social justice, economic efficiency and political stability, these had to be secondary to human dignity and freedom from coercion. Abstractions such as history, progress, humanity, national security, the future society and even social equality often proved to be bloody altars for human sacrifice. Patriotism could become as much a "disease" as the various religions. Human history has no inherent pattern; it is a mass of possibilities, accidents and improvisations. This should not make us despair, for it is not reasonable to expect that nature is designed for our benefit. Furthermore, according to Herzen, most people really don't want freedom, despite what Rousseau said to the contrary. In some remarkable passages in "From the Other Shore," his response to the failed 1848 revolutions, Herzen predicts the catastrophes of the twentieth century and the triumph of Communism. But he neither thought such cataclysms inevitable, nor did he glory over them, as did Marx and Hegel

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Mikhail Bakunin went the other way, toward a Utopian future in the name of which any sacrifice of self or others was justified. Herzen's Letters to an Old Comrade, addressed to his old friend Bakunin, accused Bakunin of willingness to sacrifice human lives to abstractions. Herzen was disgusted by the anti-humanism of the new Russian revolutionaries of the 1860's and 1870's, and they, in turn, dismissed Herzen as an aristocratic dilettante playing with words. It is ironic that today's Communists place Herzen in the pantheon of Communist precursor heroes because of a chance remark of Lenin's praising him.

Herzen wrestled with real political problems; whereas, Bakunin tended to dismiss difficulties or believe they could be resolved by plunging into revolutionary activism. He liked ringing, empty phrases such as, "All for each and each for all." Even though he rebelled against Hegel and hated Christianity, Bakunin's radical patter is full of quasi-metaphysical notions borrowed from both that do not make sense. But he was more interested in inflaming listeners than in making sense, and he was successful. He was able to laugh at his own frivolity when it was exposed. In the end, it is Herzen and not Bakunin who has left ideas of permanent important.

A Remarkable Decade: The Birth of the Russian Intelligentsia

A Remarkable Decade: The Birth of the Russian Intelligentsia Summary and Analysis

This essay takes its title and subject from Pavel Annenkov, who in the 1870's, published a memoir of his friendship during the 1840's with some of the formative figures of the Russian intelligentsia, especially Vissarion Belinsky, Ivan Turgenev and Alexander Herzen. Annenkov was an eager intellectual tourist rather than a serious thinker or critic. The group of intellectuals and writers who emerged from the university between 1838 and 1848 did three important things. They spread ideas that directly contributed to the Russian Revolution (even if it did not proceed as they imagined). They created the atmosphere of ideas reflected in the great Russian novels of mid-century by Tolstoy, Goncharov and Dostoeveky. Finally, they invented a particular type of social criticism.

These friends of Annenkov were the "intelligentsia," a Russian word invented at about this time. Not to be confused simply with intellectuals, the Russian intelligentsia saw themselves as a secular priesthood undertaking a sacred mission of enlightenment. Since Peter the Great had sent aristocrats' sons off to Europe to acquire Western learning, the gap between the intelligentsia and the Russian people had been deep. The war against Napoleon had brought Russian power into Europe's heart, engendering a national pride in Russians and inspiring the intelligentsia to take moral responsibility for Russian society's many faults.

Tsar Nicholas I mistakenly believed that German universities were safer for Russian students then French ones, especially after France's 1830 revolution. But in Germany, Russian students absorbed German romanticism, which demanded a "commitment" of the intellectual and taught that institutions, even countries, had innate "organic" destinies, which was the task of intellectuals to discover and serve. As in the West, romanticism had both a progressive and reactionary side. Progressives argued that society was inevitably moving forward and the task of the intellectual was to discern the direction of the movement and follow or hasten it. Conservative romantic Slavophils argued that no "mechanical" reforms could work without a deep understanding of the Russian soul.

Because of the "moral and intellectual vacuum" in Russia due to its lack of a Renaissance in education, these ideas, instead of competing in a crowded intellectual marketplace as in the West, became the obsessions of a few gifted individuals. Russian intellectuals are commonly stereotyped as gloomy and pessimistic. To the contrary, they adopted Western liberal and romantic ideas with a fervor unmatched in the West and were impatient to put them into practice immediately. Paradoxical or inconsistent ideas were to be redeemed by the passion and sincerity of their proponents.

"French" attitudes to literature make a sharp distinction between the life and works of artists. Vices and personal failings of the artist do not, and should not, affect judgment of his works and their aesthetic qualities. Russian writers rejected this attitude, judging writers both as artists and men. Even Western-leaning writers such as Turgenev were always aware that they were moral and spiritual exemplars to their readers, and indeed he was criticized for paying too much attention to artistic form.

In his memoirs, Herzen satirized the society formed by this group of educated men (of which he himself was one) as a group of flighty romantics fighting duels over obscure points of German and French doctrines. Annenkov had a more measured remembrance of these men as a secular brotherhood of cultural warriors. Both men admitted they never again found such a sense of camaraderie.

A Remarkable Decade: German Romanticism in Petersburg and Moscow

A Remarkable Decade: German Romanticism in Petersburg and Moscow Summary and Analysis

Though not all Russian writers in the second quarter of the nineteenth century followed German romanticism, it was nevertheless dominant. The writings of Herder, Fichte, Schelling, Schlegel and Hegel made Russia an "intellectual dependency of Germany." The romantic idea that each human group, race or institution had its own "organic" unity that could only be apprehended by an intuitive, inner identification took hold of Russian writers, left and right alike.

Because politics was transposed onto literature in mid-nineteenth-century Russia, Schelling's dictum that poets, painters and novelists capture a time and place better than sociologists and scientists was lived out by Russia's artists of this time. Many of them congregated around a gifted student named Nicholas Stankevich (1813 - 40), who spread German romantic philosophy in study circles. Stankevich was a sweet-tempered aesthete, who thought Hegel's dialectics provided a way for sensitive scholars to retreat from the squalor and brutality of Russia's conditions, since hope of reform was illusory. But because Stankevich left few writings, his influence died with him.

Stankevich's disciple, Mikhail Bakunin, was very different. He was an amateur philosopher with an ability to absorb other people's philosophies, simplify them and expound them as his own in order to hypnotize and dominate others. He was an ideal agitator, cynically aware of his effect on others and disarming enough to laugh at himself when his bluff was called by better intellects such as Herzen. During his Hegelian period, Bakunin expounded Hegel's Encyclopedia paragraph by paragraph to admiring disciples and friends. The paradoxical aspects of Hegelian doctrine delighted Bakunin, since he could use it to justify both rebellion and abject obedience to a central authority. He was later to inspire Swiss watchmakers and German peasants into flights of revolutionary enthusiasm during his travels. Another friend of Stankevich's, Nicholay Granovsky, became a moderate Hegelian and lectured on Western medieval history in Moscow after a German education. Even though he defended the Roman church and the western evolution of law, he still believed in a grand Hegelian pattern unfolding in evolution as humanity moved toward a climax of peace and justice.

Russian censorship at this time was wholly negative. The censor was on the lookout for "subversive" liberal ideas, but was often lazy and stupid and never told writers how or what to write. Writers managed to get much of their work published, even if they had to be vague or allusive. But the censor was not the only one responsible for the transposition of politics into art and literature. Romantic philosophy itself filled art with "ideological" content. Even Ivan Turgenev, the most "Westernized" Russian man of letters of his generation, showed a kind of reverse Hegelianism that rejected the positive

belief in an approaching world-climax, but nevertheless accepted the negative critique of all scientific pretensions to complete description of experience.

A Remarkable Decade: Vissarion Belinsky

A Remarkable Decade: Vissarion Belinsky Summary and Analysis

In 1856, a Slavophil writer who toured European Russia to gauge the extent of "corrupt" Western ideas was disappointed to find that virtually every educated Russian, even in "the reeking bog of provincial life," knew the name and most important writings of Vissarion Belinsky, eight years after his death. Memoirs by leading radicals of the 1830's and '40's, including Turgenev and Dostoevesky, all agree that Belinsky was the conscience of the Russian intelligentsia. Belinsky was the living embodiment of a familiar figure in Russian novels, who appears as the student tutor Basistov in Turgenev's Rudin; as Pierre Besukhov in War and Peace; as Levin in Anna Karenina; as Krusifersky in Herzen's Who is to Blame? and in many other novels. This figure is touchingly eager, often awkward, naïve, sometimes comic, sometimes tragic, blundering, but incapable of falsehood and redeemed by his intense moral convictions and dedication to truth. Virtually all later important Russian writers and thinkers claimed to be Belinsky's descendants in some way, even the communists Plekhanov and Martov. Berlin credits Belinsky with being the father of a special kind of social criticism for all Europe, not just Russia.

Because Belinsky was poor and wrote to live, much of his writing is hack-work. But Russians even today (the 1970's) regard Belinsky's best work as immortal. He was born poor in Finland and grew up in a remote city, son of a retired naval doctor who drank. After a troubled career at Moscow University as a poor scholar, he was expelled, possibly for writing a play denouncing serfdom. But a liberal professor who saw talent in him encouraged him to write reviews, which he did until his early death. Asthmatic, intense, awkward and reserved except with his friends, Belinsky would leap on his opponent when aroused by controversy and shred his opponent's arguments with moral fury, until stopped by coughing fits. Alexander Herzen admired him for daring to offend in ways that the urbane Herzen himself could not.

Although Belinsky changed his ideas about particular writers or works of art, he never abandoned his devotion to German Romantic principles, which saw the work of art as an organic, spiritual whole, reflecting the spiritual essence of a society. He read literature intensely to find "ideas," which were not just intellectual but emotional, moral and spiritual. Belinsky's main criterion of judgment was whether the ideas in a work were true or false. In a trivial, but telling, instance, Belinsky criticizes Goldsmith's The Vicar of Wakefield for presenting the Vicar's gullibility and Christian resignation as superior to a life of action and resistance. Books and ideas were matters not just of life and death to Belinsky but of damnation and salvation.

Although he over-praised some Russian writers who are best forgotten today, Belinsky was the first to recognize Pushkin as the true father of Russian literature, the Peter the Great of Russian writers, whose dominance of Russian literature has no parallel in other literatures (although Belinsky's devotion bemused and frightened the snobbish Pushkin). Belinsky correctly assessed the worth of Lermontov, Gogol, Turgenev and Dostoevsky, as well as some second-rank writers. Even though he furthered a historical appreciation for these writers, his greatest insights as a critic came not from historical criticism per se but from plunging himself intensely into their works.

Belinsky was converted by Stankevich to the idealism of Fichte and Schelling, which led him to prefer contemplation of art to political involvement. Later, Bekunin converted him to Hegelianism. For a year he proclaimed the insignificance of the individual before the march of Hegel's god of history and the necessity of accepting "reality" in all its forms, including the supremacy of Russian autocracy. This reversal stupefied his friends and admirers, but he could not maintain it. He broke down when Herzen visited him and admitted that he had been wrong. In the end he really cared for individuals; he had wrongly sacrificed himself on Hegel's altar. Belinsky wrote letters to his friends confessing and apologizing and repudiated Hegel's abstractions, blaming this interlude on the oppression of Russian life. Finally, reading Feuerbach made him a socialist and materialist.

Belinsky's most famous work, written as he lay dying from consumption, was a letter to the novelist Nikolai Gogol. In 1847, Gogol had published a violently Slavophilic tract calling for a regenerated Russia of tsar, serf, landlord and Orthodox Church. Belinsky's letter accusing the Gogol of treason to culture and progress was hailed as a work of genius by Herzen. It was for reading this letter aloud to others that Dostoevsky was sentenced to death and later transported to Siberia.

A very few writers or artists had previously managed to rise from low birth to success and gainthe attention of the gentry or nobility, but all had been either assimilated or tamed. Belinsky was the first to approach his social superiors from a position of equality without losing a touch of rustic crudeness and aggressiveness. His tone was to become that of all Russian radicals of the later nineteenth century. In this sense, Belinsky's heir is the crude nihilist Bazarov in Turgenev's Fathers and Children, even though Belinksy retained his respect for artistic truth from whatever source. But although later radicals imitated Belinsky's crude manners out of principle, he himself used them only because he had no choice. Despite his professed admiration for Western science and culture and claims that Russia was backward and must learn from the West, Belinsky spoke no foreign languages and was physically homesick during trips to Europe. Belinsky's Slav temperament and personal distaste for the habits of Western bourgeoisie conflicted with his intellectual admiration for the West's advances. This conflict runs throughout educated Russian opinion even today.

A Remarkable Decade: Alexander Herzen

A Remarkable Decade: Alexander Herzen Summary and Analysis

No good biography exists of Alexander Herzen, the most remarkable Russian political writer of the nineteenth century, perhaps because his autobiography is so remarkable. Born in Moscow in 1812, Herzen was the illegitimate son of a moody, difficult and wealthy Russian gentleman and his mistress, a German lady from Stuttgart. ("Herzen," German for "heart," indicates Herzen's illegitimacy.) Herzen received the regular education of a young nobleman at the University of Moscow, becoming one of Turgenev's "superfluous men." These were young men of aristocratic or upper-class birth dissatisfied with stultifying Russian life and feeling called to some radical response. Usually they reconciled themselves to reality and sank back into the life of a provincial landowner or became neurotic, self-destructive personalities endlessly talking about change. Since Herzen wanted neither of these options, he emigrated to western Europe to live a life of writing and activism.

Anxious to avoid being simply an over-educated dilettante, Herzen became a kind of Russian Voltaire. He founded the first anti-tsarist periodical, The Bell, which published articles of topical interest. It gained wide influence within Russia by naming names of corrupt officials, even though it was illegal and circulated secretly. Unlike many influential writers, Herzen was a dazzling talker, who listeners either adored or hated. In his friend Pavel Annenkov's eyes, Herzen's sometimes malicious wit toward his friends was redeemed by an unshakable devotion to truth.

Like most educated Russians of his generation, Herzen was a Hegelian. But he made out of Hegel a personal doctrine that no one grand theory or doctrine could provide actual solutions to society's problems. Actually, he maintained a very Russian tension between a passionate partiality for social justice and an intellectual commitment to skepticism about all ideologies and imposed solutions, which led to human sacrifice in the name of an idea. Although he admired and was friends with many European socialists, he detested the "despotism of formulas" - the doctrine that some had to die or be sacrificed today so that future generations could enjoy a utopia. The "goal" of life was life itself, the value of freedom was self-evident today and didn't require marching toward a distant goal. He admitted that the great social problems might have no perfect or final solution. He set forth these beliefs in his political testament, From the Other Shore, a book of essays inspired by the failures of the European revolutions of 1848. He was attacked for these positions by the revolutionaries of the 1860's and 1870's, who dismissed him as an aristocratic salon-talker.

Although Herzen's novels shared with Turgenev's a sense that many human problems are insoluble, they lack the contemplative distance that allowed Turgenev to produce finished works of art. Herzen intrudes himself too much into his novels, but his autobiographical writings are works of imaginative genius. Both Herzen and Turgenev

preferred truth-telling to doctrine, and both were violently attacked for their detached stance. Herzen understood the motives of the revolutionaries and admired many of them, but he also understood the costs of revolution. His moral "war on two fronts" against the abuses of the old regime and the promised violence and upheaval of the new, makes him one of the most sensitive social interpreters of the century. He was the founder of a strain of libertarian humanism extinguished in Russia by the 1917 revolution.

Russian Populism

Russian Populism Summary and Analysis

Russian populism wasn't a single party of doctrine, but a widespread radical movement in the middle nineteenth century, declining after the 1881 assassination of Tsar Alexander II. Strongly influenced by Herzen's writings, populists believed that the Russian peasant commune reflected a uniquely harmonious and just social order, whose principles should apply to society. These communes, or obshcnina, were organized into collectives called mir, which periodically redistributed land to be tilled among peasants. Western radicals such as Fichte, Buonarroti, Fourier, Hegel, Mill, Proudhon, Owen and Marx all influenced the populists. Their opposition to both individualism and authoritarian centralism may also have owed something to Russian Orthodox traditions, which eschewed both Catholic centralism and Protestant individualism.

The most important populist leader, Nikolay Chernyshevsky, was neither a brilliant intellect, an original thinker nor an eloquent writer. Instead, Chernyshevsky had an un-Russian gift for the patient accumulation of facts and detailed, concrete proposals. He preferred the detailed socialist plans of the Petrashevsky group (to which Dostoevsky had belonged) to the imaginative flights of Herzen and Bakunin. He was influential with the new generation of the 1860's, which rejected the "failures" of figures such as Herzen after 1848. Chernyshevsky's father had been a parish priest, and his humble origins led him to a distrust, later to become a fanatical hatred, of liberal experts (but not Western science). This made him a natural leader of the low-born revolutionaries of the 1860's and '70's. Chernyshevsky believed that Russia could "leap over" the capitalist stage to a large-scale organization that would somehow preserve the peasant commune. He never reconciled his belief in both the independent, self-organizing peasant commune and large-scale industry. But those peasants and workers who could read found in him their spokesperson. His didactic novel What Is To Be Done? (whose title would later also be used by Lenin) described pure and virtuous "new men" of the spiritually-regenerated communes of the future. Because he believed in Mills' utilitarianism, he preached that human needs could be "scientifically" planned for. With the poet Nekrasov, he edited a journal called the Contemporary, where he and the extreme Dobrolyubov used art as a grimly utilitarian weapon to achieve social justice. For this reason, writers such as Turgenev and Botkin despised Chernyshevsky.

Chernyshevsky distrusted the state, believing it was always the instrument of an oppressing class. Like Fourier, he believed that economic rights (food, shelter, security) had to come before political rights for the peasants. Unlike the Slavophils, he believed that the Russian mir was not unique to Russia, but had analogues in other places. In spite of all their pseudo-scientific reasoning, Chernyshevsky and his followers were in the end moved by moral revulsion for the human costs of capitalism. Unlike Marxists, they did not preach that history had an inevitable direction. Though they were atheists, they retained a moral and religious respect for the rights of individuals. They invented

the idea of totally-educated revolutionaries, who dedicate their entire lives to the revolution, but they drew the line at giving the party control over individual consciences once the revolution was achieved.

In the summer of 1874, thousands of educated Russian populists went to the villages to learn from the suspicious and often hostile peasants, but they were rebuffed and their movement faded. Populism ultimately failed. Populism's disputes had all been about means, not ends, which all populists agreed included anarchism, equality and a full life for all. After the terrorism of the 1870's, culminating in the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, the new tsar cracked down with the public's support. Surviving radicals moved toward Marxism, with its insistence that the capitalist stage was inevitable. The 1890's, with its increased development, seemed to prove the Marxists right. But capitalism wasn't really fully established in 1917, when Lenin launched his revolution. Lenin's revolution resembled the one advocated by the populists Tkachev and other followers of Blanqui, much more than it did anything described in Marx. Lenin always admitted that Communist practice owed much to the Populists. It certainly fulfilled the warning by some populists that a revolution brought about by a dedicated elite of revolutionaries would result in the dictatorship of that elite.

Tolstoy and Enlightenment

Tolstoy and Enlightenment Summary and Analysis

A critical consensus of the last hundred years has held that Leo Tolstoy was a great novelist, but a bad thinker. This consensus was challenged by the Russian critic Mikhailovsky in the mid-1870's, in an essay that deserves more attention. Although Tolstoy's opinions about particular writers could be idiosyncratic, he always addresses significant questions directly. Tolstoy's ideas varied less during his life than is thought. The thinker he most agrees with is Rousseau, with whom he shared a rejection of original sin and a belief that education and intellectual "experts" ruin children and the innocent, common people. He rejected both the Westernizing progressives and the nationalist Slavophils, although his temperament was more comfortable with the latter. But he sought values in the experience of the individual, rather than in any mission of Church, state or any other collective entity. Truth for him was eternal, not historically evolving, and he rejected all forms of Hegelianism as nonsense.

Tolstoy left the University of Kazan after concluding that the professors wasted their time on trivialities, meaning the classical educational tradition with its emphasis on "dead" languages, theology and history. Having gained a reputation as one of Russia's most promising writers with his early stories and novels, he nevertheless inspired unease in literary salons because of his reserved, even arrogant, manner and his conviction that "real life" was superior to all forms of intellectual endeavor. He earned respect, but had no close friends among the leading writers of his generation, except the poet Fet, a conservative country squire. Tolstoy agonized over the peasants' plight and concluded he had to begin with his own estate. His travels to Europe left him contemptuous of German and English educational "expertise," so he built schools for his estate peasants, where he taught them himself.

Even though he presents characters such as the Coassack Lukashka in The Cossacks; Pierre in War and Peace, and Levin in Anna Karenina as unspoiled and innocent beings Tolstoy's novelistic practice doesn't accord with his unswerving conviction that children and "simple" people were innocent and unspoiled repositories of truth. But his critical thought centered on the difference between natural "truth" and invented or civilized artifice. His strongest term of contempt for a writer is "made-up," indicating that the writer didn't really live the experience he reports.

Tolstoy ended up with a program of Christian anarchism that shared much with that of the Russian populists, though without their socialism and belief in scientific methods, for which Tolstoy had nothing but contempt. Although he was accused of quietism, he actually advocated a program of action in which intellectuals, alienated as they are, nevertheless can and should help share the fruits of civilization with the common people and thus reintegrate a broken society. But such efforts must learn from nature; intellectuals must learn from peasants as much or more than they give them. Although the conflicts in Tolstoy's views never found resolution, his stubborn devotion to truth

makes him, for Berlin, in Tolstoy's agonizing, a martyr to European enlightenment, including its contradictions.

Fathers and Children: Turgenev and the Liberal Predicament

Fathers and Children: Turgenev and the Liberal Predicament Summary and Analysis

The precautions the Tsarist government took over the funeral of Ivan Turgenev in 1883, two years after the Assassination of Alexander II, may surprise those who see Turgenev as an apolitical writer of lyrical prose and quietly-observed moments. But although the authorities were correct that his novels were not "safe," he was not a moral preacher such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Like all Russian writers of his generation, he was deeply concerned about the condition of his society. He had been deeply influenced by Belinsky's diatribes against everything dark and false in Russia and had listened to Bakunin's Hegelian sermons. But he was not comfortable in any rigid ideology.

But Turgenev had an un-Russian gift for what Keats called negative capability, an ability to enter into views and lives alien to his own. The common view of Turgenev as a literary writer drawn reluctantly into politics against his will is misleading. No figure in Russian literature, either of left or right, has been so consistently attacked from both sides. This is partly because he refused to preach in a country where writers have always been preachers, and partly because he was amiable and even somewhat timid. Indeed, Turgenev himself was obsessed by the problem of the sensitive man who is ineffectual on the great issues of his day. His novel Rudin, whose protagonist is based partly on himself and partly on Bakunin, sketches such a figure, a "superfluous man," as Turgenev called them in a famous essay.

The "new men," uncompromising radicals of the 1860's and 1970's, increasingly rejected Turgenev as just such a superfluous man. In a famous encounter, the radical Dobrolyubov refused to speak to Turgenev in the offices of the magazine where they both published. Turgenev later switched to a more conservative journal. Turgenev's most famous novel, Fathers and Children (or Fathers and Sons) is concerned with relations between these two generations, whose enemies are the same but who suffer from a generation gap. The novel provoked one of the greatest controversies in Russian letters when it was published in 1862. The character of the radical self-described nihilist, Bazarov, based partly on Belinsky and partly on Bakunin, became a continuing flash-point of criticism and remains so even today (1970's). Bazarov rejects all civilized values and is interested only in destructive criticism of everything rotten in the old regime—what will replace it is for others to decide. Was Bazarov the "first Bolshevik," as one critic later claimed? Turgenev was attacked from left and right and accused both of bowing and scraping to radicalism and of mocking it through caricature. Turgenev was wounded by the criticism, especially from the left; in later letters, he even claimed that he himself shared most of Bazarov's values, though at other times he said things that appeared to contradict this statement.

His novel Smoke, published five years later, was an attempt to win back into the good graces of the progressives, but again Turgenev was attacked from all sides. In persisting to cultivate personal relations with radicals, even wanted terrorists, he restored his relations with the radical young to some extent. His 1876, novel Virgin Soil, features a revolutionary who commits suicide because he cannot adjust to the hard, disciplined life of the new brand of fanatical revolutionaries. To Berlin, Turgenev's virtues of close observation and rejection of all systems, even his timidity, make him the ultimate "pluralist."

Characters

Feodor Dostoevesky

Considered one of Russia's most important novelists along with Tolstoy and Turgenev, Feodor Dostoevesky (1821 - 81) led a life as dramatic as any of his novels. Born to an alcoholic father and suffering periodic attacks of epilepsy from the age of ten, he graduated from officers' school. In the 1840's he was part of the Petrashevsky Circle, a discussion group of discontented young educated Russians, including radical reformers and conspirators. After Europe's 1848 revolutions, several circle members were arrested and tried, including Dostoevsky. He was sentenced to death for reading aloud the famous letter of Vissarion Belinsky denouncing Gogol, but at the last moment as he faced the firing squad, his sentence was commuted to eight years of exile in the Siberian city of Omsk.

Dostoevsky's prison experiences sparked a religious conversion in which he rejected Western ideas and values and turned toward his Orthodox Christian faith. His novels, The Possessed and The Devils, and his essay "A Writer's Diary," criticize socialist and nihilist revolutionaries. He praised Slavophil or Russian nationalist movements, which sought salvation in native Russian peasant institutions. He moved away from his earlier drawing-room stories toward dark novels in which tortured characters make agonizing moral choices. After his return to St. Petersburg, he edited several unsuccessful literary journals. When these were suppressed after the Polish Rebellion of 1863, Dostoevsky traveled to Europe, where he developed a gambling compulsion, racked up large debts and fell into depression.

His most famous novel, Crime and Punishment, was written to satisfy debts to publishers, as was his short story "The Gambler." His novel The Brothers Karamazov was influenced by the mystical philosopher Vladimir Solovyov, who became a Nihilist but moved back to Orthodoxy and is thought to be the model for Alyosha Karamazov. Dostoevsky's short story "The Underground Man," in which a nameless protagonist rages against the modern world, is considered a founding document of Existentialism and was a primary model for Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man. Toward the end of his life, his speeches at the funeral of the poet Nekrasov and the dedication of a monument to Pushkin spread his fame as a prophetic figure.

Nikolay Chernyshevsky

Chernyshevsky was a revolutionary leader of the radical Populist movement in mid-nineteenth century Russia, which sought to build a new society on the model of the Russian peasant commune. Son of a parish priest, Chernyshevsky was "from the people" and became an example to the "new men" of the 1860's and 1870's. These were revolutionaries disillusioned with earlier, well-born literary writers and thinkers such as Herzen, Tolstoy, and Turgenev, who were born to privilege. Unlike the literary men of

the 1840's, Chernyshevsky was willing to delve into the actual conditions of the Russian serfs. His books detailing plans for communal reforms of Russian society were filled with facts and figures, making dull reading today. But the hero of his famous didactic novel, What is To Be Done? written from prison, is a disciplined, ascetic revolutionary, who sacrifices everything to the revolution. It deeply influenced radicals of all types, including Vladimir Lenin, who wrote a tract of the same name.

Vissarion Belinsky

The most influential Russian critic of the mid-nineteenth century, Vissarion Belinsky came from a humble background and always had a note of rustic clumsiness and directness, even rudeness, in his writings that was much imitated by later radicals. Belinsky was thrown out of Moscow University, possibly for writing a play against serfdom. A liberal professor encouraged him to write articles and reviews, which he did for the rest of his life. Much of this was hack work to earn a living, but Belinsky was redeemed by his absolute commitment to the truth as he saw it. Resembling the awkward, but earnest and truthful, heroes of many Russian novels and folk stories, he enlivened discussion circles with his passionate conviction. Herzen admired Belinsky for having the courage to offend that Herzen himself sometimes did not have. He gained fame for a deathbed letter to Gogol, denouncing the latter's craven support of autocracy in 1847, and accusing the great man of treason to culture and progress. His stance and voice made him a model for later Russian revolutionaries. The character Bazarov in Turgenev's Fathers and Children is partly based on Belinsky.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770 -1831) was by far the most important philosopher of the nineteenth century, at least in terms of influence. He developed a philosophy that deeply affected the German Romantic movement, which in turn spread throughout Europe. (It also greatly influenced Karl Marx, who, however, rejected Hegel's spiritualism for materialism.) Berlin calls early and mid-nineteenth-century Russia an "intellectual dependency" of Germany because of the influence of Hegel, Shiller and other German Romantics. This influence was due to the preference of the Tsar for sending the children of Russian noblemen to German rather than French universities, since France had been the homeland of the French Revolution and the July Revolution of 1830.

In his Lectures on the Philosophy of History (or "World-History"), published 1837, Hegel taught that history was incarnated in a "world-soul" or absolute spirit of reason that could be embodied in a unique individual (such as Napoleon, who he admired for a time), the state or the culture of peoples or "races." The job of the enlightened, aware individual was to attune himself to the inner logic of History in order to understand its guiding pattern.

Herzen considered himself a Hegelian, but made out of Hegel a personal doctrine that Hegel would not have recognized. Belinsky shocked friends when he went through a doctrinaire Hegelian period, during which he preached submitting to the "iron laws" of history, but he later recanted and admitted he had been wrong.

Alexander Herzen

The most influential Russian critic of the nineteenth century, Alexander Herzen (1812 - 1870) spent much of his life in self-imposed exile in Europe after a youth bouncing from internal exile to minor government positions. He founded the first anti-Tsarist journal, which circulated illegally and secretly in Russia but was widely read, even by government officials. Later, he founded a Russian-language press in London, which poured books into Russia. Left rich by his father's death, Herzen became friends with many of Europe's most influential leading men. The Rothschild banking family helped unfreeze his paternal assets when they were blocked by the Russian government. Although Herzen promoted Western scientific advances and liberal ideas, he was deeply disappointed by the failures of the 1848 revolutions and became increasingly opposed to violent socialist and Utopian revolutionary plans. Herzen wrote political novels, which are mostly forgotten today, but his political writings, especially his memoirs From the Other Shore and My Past and Thoughts, are considered masterpieces of Russian prose.

Leo (Lev) Tolstoy

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) is, by consensus, one of the greatest novelists of all time, not only of Russia, but the world. A well-to-do landowner, like many other writers and intellectuals of his generation, Tolstoy was racked with guilt over his privileged status. He served in the army as a private, and his first success as a writer came from stories he published while serving in Sebastopol. He championed the virtues of Russian peasants and organized schools on his estate to teach them. His educational ideas owed much to Rousseau's primitivism and belief in the unspoiled goodness of peasants and children and the corrupting effects of education and civilization. These ideas survived his mid-life conversion to an unorthodox brand of Christianity that could be described as libertarian, and stressed non-violence, vegetarianism and egalitarianism. His most famous works are the monumental historical novel War and Peace, which revolves around Napoleon's attempt to conquer Moscow, and Anna Karenina, which details a privileged woman's adulterous love affair and its consequences. His most famous short story, "The Death of Ivan Illich," details the spiritual reactions of a man facing a death from illness.

Tolstoy, suspicious of Ivan Turgenev's championing of Western ideas, quarreled with him. The two did not speak for seventeen years, until on his deathbed Turgenev urged Tolstoy to "return to literature."

Ivan Turgenev

Considered one of the greatest nineteenth-century Russian novelists, Ivan Turgenev made his name with his 1852 A Sportsman's Sketches (sometimes translated as Notes of a Hunter), one of the first Russian novels to present the lives of serfs. He spent much of his life in Europe, fleeing the repressive atmosphere of Nicholas I. His 1860, short story "Diary of a Superfluous Man" portrayed discontented upper-class intellectuals unable to find their place in Russian society. His most famous and influential work, 1862's Fathers and Sons (or Fathers and Children), at first, poorly received by critics, concerned in part the clash between the generation of the 1840's (his own) and the "new men" of the 1860's. Turgenev and Tolstoy had a long feud, not speaking for seventeen years. From his deathbed, Turgenev famously urged Tolstoy to "return to literature" from moral preaching.

Tsar Nicholas I Romanov

Tsar Nicholas I ruled Russia from 1825 to 1855. He was also the constitutional King of Poland until 1831, and Grand Duke of Finland. Because Nicholas had two elder brothers, he was not raised to rule. But when the elder brother died and the second eldest twice refused to rule, Nicholas claimed the throne. In the surrounding confusion, army officers hatched a plot to seize power, known as the Decembrist rebellion. Nicholas managed to suppress it, but it left him opposed to anything that challenged his autocratic power. He sent troops into Poland when its leadership deposed him as constitutional King, reducing it from a semi-autonomous federation to a dependent province of the Russian Empire. After the failed European revolutions of 1848-9, when Russian troops helped suppress a revolt in Hapsburg Austria, Russia under Nicholas was called the "gendarme [policeman] of Europe." The years 1848 to 1855, were among the most repressive of the century in Russia. Nicholas' wars against the Ottoman Empire provoked Western fears of Russian expansion in Europe. Along with disputes with France over who was to protect Christians in the Holy Land, Nicholas' moves against Turkey finally inspired France and Britain to intervene on the side of the Ottomans in the Crimean War (1853-6). Russia's defeat in that war revealed its weaknesses and corruption and increased disenchantment among young radicals.

Tsar Alexander II Romanov

Born 1818, succeeded Nicholas I in 1855. Alexander legally emancipated the serfs in 1861, although the manner of their emancipation left their condition barely improved. He pushed judicial, tax, military and commercial reforms, as well as railway development. He granted greater autonomy to Finland (ruled by Russia at this time) and helped liberate Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire, for which he is remembered as a liberator in both countries. Alexander had already survived several assassination attempts when, in 1881, he was killed by anarchist terrorists in a plot involving three bombers, who staked out his usual route to inspect royal troops. The assassination sparked pogroms of Jews (one conspirator was Jewish) and shocked ordinary Russians, who supported renewed

police crackdowns and an ending of reforms. Plans underway to convene the Duma or parliament were postponed until 1905.

Mikhail Bakunin

Born to a noble family like so many other Russian radicals, Mikhail Bakunin (1814 - 1876) became one of the best-known revolutionaries in Europe, espousing what became known as collectivist anarchism. Bakunin was a mesmerizing speaker, who could captivate a room with his oratory. Despite deep differences between the two, he remained friends with Alexander Herzen, and at one time worked with him on Herzen's influential anti-Tsarist magazine, The Bell. According to Berlin, Bakunin lacked the intellectual gifts of Herzen, being merely an agitator whose ideas were borrowed from others; he was someone who enjoyed pushing ideas to their limits out of a kind of recklessness and love of action.

Because of his anti-tsarist agitation, Bakunin's title of nobility was stripped from him. He was captured and sent to Siberian exile but escaped and ended up in London.

Objects/Places

St. Petersburg

In nineteenth century Russia, St. Petersburg was the center of Russian court life. It had been founded by Tsar Peter the Great as a "window on the West," to help re-orient Russian nobles to Western ways. Renamed Petrograd and then Leningrad after the Russian Revolution of 1917, it was given back its old name after the fall of Communism in 1989. It is a port city on the Neva River, connecting to the Gulf of Finland.

Slavophilism / pan-Slavism

Slavophilism, founded in nineteenth-century Russia, was a broad movement, or group of movements, with both "right" and "left" wings. All its wings shared a love of Russian language and literature and the traditions of Russian peasants and a suspicion of Western rationalism, industry and middle-class values. The movement acted as a counterweight to the sense of inferiority many Russians felt in the face of European achievements. Right-wing Slavophiles extolled Tsar, nobility and serfdom and maintained divine sanctions for these institutions. Many revolutionaries of the left, despite their acceptance of Western science and progressive values and their denouncing of the degradations of Russian rural life, nevertheless maintained belief in a Russian way or revolution that differed from Western models. Both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky shared certain beliefs with the Slavophils, as did many lesser writers of the period.

Slavophilism is closely related to pan-Slavism, the doctrine by which Russia saw and presented itself as the savior and guardian of all Slavic peoples, especially in the Balkans. Pan-Slavism was a major motivator in the series of nineteenth-century wars that Russia fought with the Ottoman Empire, which ruled much of the Balkans for much of the nineteenth century. It also justified Russian domination and/or rule of Poland, Lithuania and other Slavic areas.

Intelligentsia

Both the word and concept of "intelligentsia" are Russian and were invented in the early nineteenth century. Berlin explains that the term means more than "intellectuals;" it refers to groups of intellectuals who see themselves as a secular priesthood, a dedicated band of brothers with a sacred responsibility to both preach and act on the truth as they see it. In the nineteenth century, the intelligentsia were all opposed to at least some features of Russian life, whether the tsarist autocracy, the oppression of the serfs, the inferiority of Russian science and industry, the incompetence of the Russian state bureaucracy or the simple lack of amenities for any but the nobly-born. The concept includes the notion that the intelligentsia are in some sense the guiding lights of society. The concept contributed to the later notion of a guiding elite of ascetic

revolutionaries, which was accepted both by the Populists and by Lenin and his Communist elite.

Petrashevsky Circle

When Tsar Nicholas I cracked down on all forms of dissent after the failed 1848 revolutions in Europe, he increased police infiltration of suspect groups. The only actual conspiracy they found, which some police and government officials later admitted was probably not as dangerous as they claimed in court, was the Petrashevsky Circle, a discussion group of young radicals that included Belinsky and Dostoevsky. While some among the group's members were merely artists and writers seeking a congenial discussion group, some were indeed revolutionaries with real, if hazy, plans to overthrow the existing government. Dostoevesky and several others were arrested and tried; Dostoevsky's crime was reading aloud to the group Belinsky's famous deathbed letter accusing the great Russian writer Gogol of treason, after the latter turned into a supporter of the throne, serfdom and reaction in an 1847 essay.

Decembrists

Nicholas Romanov was third in the line of succession to the Russian throne and so was not trained to rule. But when his eldest brother died and the next-eldest, Constantine, refused to take the throne. A group of officers who had belonged to a secrete organization that favored constitutional reforms attempted to mount a coup. Because the key activities took place in December 1825, the rebels became known as Decembrists. Thanks largely to poor coordination among the plotters, Nicholas managed to suppress the rebellion. Four of the rebels were hanged in the last public execution in Imperial Russia. When the rope broke, instead of pardoning the condemned men as was customary for survivors of botched executions, Nicholas ordered them re-hung. Although Nicholas I (as he became known) had prevailed, he had a lifelong fear and suspicion of dissent that deepened after a series of failed revolutions in Europe in 1848.

The Bell

From his European exile, Alexander Herzen used his wealth to finance a series of Russian-language periodicals and publications designed to attack the evils and abuses of Russian life. The longest-lived of these was The Bell (Kolokol in Russian), published from 1857 to 1867. The Bell gained immense influence in Russia after 1855, due to its political journalism, which named names of corrupt officials. It was sent into Russia and widely read by all sides of the spectrum, even government officials who were attacked in its pages, although it circulated illegally. It was even rumored that the Tsar himself read it. In July 1857, The Bell broke the news that the new Tsar Alexander II was considering legal emancipation of the serfs, and it published impatient editorials until the emancipation finally occurred in 1862.

Yasnaya Polyana

Count Lev Tolstoy's estate of Yasnaya Polyana (''Clear Glade') was the site of his experiments in Utopian living. During his lifetime, Tolstoy founded twelve schools for his dependent serfs. During his later years, the site became a kind of shrine, where Tolstoy received visitors from all over the world. It was preserved as a state site even under the Communists.

1848 Revolutions

A half-century of explosive growth and rapid industrialism marked by periodic economic crises in Europe had produced many discontents among all classes - the nobility, who were sick of absolute monarchy; the middle classes, whose outlook was insecure; and the urban poor, who had flooded into cities, driven from a countryside in crisis. During 1848, a wave of revolutions swept across most of Europe's states, beginning in Sicily and spreading across France, Italy, the German states of the south and west (not yet unified), Poland and Hungary. Most of the spokesmen of the revolutionaries demanded expanded suffrage, press freedom and freedom of assembly. But in some countries, the demand was for ethnic-nationalist parliaments. The Hungarian revolution extended into 1849 and was put down with the help of Russian troops, who defeated a rebel army and handed it over to the ruling Habsburg regime. All the revolutions were suppressed, causing many European liberals to despair. But within a few decades, most of the goals of the revolutionaries - or at least, their middle-class spokesmen - were achieved.

Crimean War, 1853-56

The Crimean War was directly inspired by European fears of Russia's growing influence in Europe and especially its challenges to the declining Ottoman Empire. After helping the Habsburgs defeat the Hungarian revolutionaries in 1849, Tsar Nicholas I believed he would have their agreement for Russia to act as the defender of Slav minorities within the Balkan states, still controlled by Turkey. But Austria had no desire for pan-Slav agitation in any territories it controlled or hoped to liberate from the Turks, since it also ruled Slav minorities. Britain believed that a stable Ottoman Empire was vital to Europe's balance of power, and it feared Russia becoming a maritime power and gaining too much access to the Mediterranean. France competed with Russia to be the protector of Christian Holy Places in Jerusalem, then under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire. When France used gunboat diplomacy to coerce a treaty from the Ottoman sultan declaring France the protector of Christian holy sites, Nicholas I deployed his armies along the Danube and began a diplomatic offensive to isolate the Ottomans and woo European countries. But the motives of the forces opposing him were too strong. Even after Nicholas removed his armies from the Danube, France and Britain demanded increased access to the Danube and an end to Russian pressure on the Ottomans. When Nicholas refused, war was declared.

It was mostly fought on the Crimean Peninsula, which Russia had won back from the Crimean Tatars in the eighteenth century, although the Baltic Sea was an important lesser theater of war. The Crimean War saw several military innovations, including sea mines, military telegraph, military railroads, trench warfare, massed artillery fire and the Minie ball, all soon to make their appearance in the American Civil War. Exposure of Russian blundering during the war increased dissatisfaction with official corruption.

Nihilism

Ivan Turgenev did not invent the term "nihilism," which had existed in philosophy to describe the reductio ad absurdum of rationalism, and it had been used in this sense by German philosopher Friedrich Jacobi. But Turgenev popularized the term and gave it its modern meaning in his novel Fathers and Children, which presented the fascinating character of Yevgeny Bazarov, who declares himself a "nihilist," whose destructive revolutionary criticism of all existing society and institutions is meant to "clear the ground" for a new society that will replace it. The character of Bazarov, who was partly based on the critic Vissarion Belinsky and partly on Turgenev's friend, anarchist agitator Mikhail Bakunin, caused an immediate and lasting sensation in Russian letters, one that Berlin claims continues into the present day (1970's). Bazarov was called the "first Bolshevik" by one critic, and critics from both right and left savagely attacked Turgenev, the right for exalting Bazarov and radicalism, the left for making a caricature of them. At lest one leftist critic, though, proudly proclaimed himself a nihilist. Feodor Dostoevsky criticized nihilist revolutionaries in several novels, notably The Devils (also known in English translation as The Possessed and The Demons). The character of Verkhovensky, criticized as a nihilist in The Possessed, is based on real-life revolutionary Sergey Nechayev, who was found guilty of murder.

Themes

Monism vs. Pluralism

The most important theme in all these essays is the one explicitly addressed in Berlin's celebrated essay, "The Hedgehog and the Fox." The theme there is the tension between "monism" - the desire to explain everything according to one vision or doctrine, such as Marxism - and "pluralism," the ability to see life in its multiplicity without reducing it to a single explanation or cause. This tension assumes one form in political discourse, between doctrinaire political theorists and those who struggle for progress and equality without placing their hopes on any one Utopian scheme. In art, the tension assumes a different form, with those, such as Tolstoy and Turgenev, able to appreciate human experience in all its complexity clearly emerging as superior artists to the writers of didactic novels, such as Chernyshevsky and even Herzen (in his novels). In her Introduction, Aileen Douglas affirms that this was a central concern of Isaiah Berlin's own thought. The backdrop to this discussion is the readers' awareness of the destructive effects of the the monist vision that produced the Communist revolution and establishment of the Soviet state, which was much more repressive than the tsarist one it replaced and cost hundreds of millions of lives over its life. Although Berlin is an unequivocal pluralist, he can't deny the fascination of monist visions for human beings, which may answer deep needs that can never be denied and will therefore remain a constant temptation.

Western v. Russian values

The distinction between Russian "barbarism" and Western European "civilization" is a background theme in virtually all of the essays. This is a two-edged theme, because while Russians often felt a sense of inferiority to the rest of Europe. Peter the Great's reforms had included sending the children of the nobility to Europe for university educations, and French became the first language of many Russian nobles. But Russia's resistance to Napoleon, which brought Russian troops and power into the heart of Western Europe, provoked a surge of nationalistic pride in Russians of all stripes and statuses.

Many, like the Slavophils, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, reacted by proclaiming the superiority of Russian "barbaric" virtues—the simple peasant and carefree Cossack over over-refined Europeans. In fact, Berlin says that many of the figures about which he writes had within themselves tensions and conflicts regarding "Western" vs. "Russian" values, which they often never resolved. So, for example, Vissarion Belinsky theoretically believed in Western Europe as an example for Russia, both its achievement of art and culture and its socialist tradition. But in fact, he never learned another language and disliked Europe the few times he traveled there. Both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were cultured and spoke several European languages, but both embraced their own versions of Slavophilis, and both rejected "Western" values. In Turgenev's

novel Fathers and Children, an opponent rejects Bazarov's "nihilism" as reflecting nothing more than the "Mongol" brute force of Oriental savagery. Alexander Herzen spent much of his life in Europe but published anti-tsarist magazines that had a big readership and effect inside Russia. Dostoevsky came to see his experiences in Europe, including gambling and falling into depression, as symptoms of an alienation from spiritual values shared by the European bourgeoisie.

Displacement of Politics into Literature

The displacement of politics into literature is discussed in several of the essays. Because of conditions in Russia, including Tsarist repression (though it was far milder than later Communist repression), the only way to discuss politics safely was through literature. Russia had never experienced a Renaissance of educational institutions, as Western Europe had. Thus the moralism of the Russian Orthodox Church tended to permeate ideas, even among those who said they rejected Orthodoxy or Christianity. At the same time, the conditions of Russian life meant that each and every man of letters felt compelled to take stands on the "accursed questions" — the terrible condition of the serfs, the absolute rule of the tsar, the corruption and inefficiency of the nobility and government bureaucrats and Russia's role in mid-nineteenth-century Europe as a prop for every monarchist and reactionary regime.

The influence of Hegel, his immanent religion of History's progress and doctrine of romantic "commitment," had immense influence on all the Russian thinkers discussed here, even those who ended up rejecting Hegel or (like Herzen) made of his work a personal philosophy that Hegel himself would not have recognized. The critic Vissarion Belinsky, embodied all these influences and tensions becoming the exemplary figure of a Russian truth-telling intellectual for several later generations. Belinsky had humble origins and lacked some refinements of the Western-educated nobles' sons but read passionately and with a conviction that telling the truth about both art and social reality was the defining characteristic of a man of letters. All these circumstances combined to make being called "apolitical" the absolute worst sin for a Russian writer or intellectual. Dostoevsky and Tolstoy both gained fame, at least as much as moral preachers as novelists, while Turgenev was condemned by both left and right precisely for being perceived as a pure artist, not political enough, or at least not clear enough about his politics. But even Turgenev protested that he was committed to freedom, and against the evils of Russian life, though he distrusted the violent solutions of the revolutionaries and Utopian socialists.

Style

Perspective

Even though Isaiah Berlin's essays originally appeared in academic journals, they were addressed not to academics but to a general audiences. Many were originally delivered as public lectures. Thus, they are not specialist pieces. Nevertheless, they do assume a degree of general knowledge far beyond what today's writers for general audiences expect. Berlin's style often runs to long sentences with many clauses, as he pursues a theme or idea. He often paraphrases the content of forgotten Russian novels, pamphlets or essays, offering only occasional or oblique comments.

Berlin's main purpose is, first, to draw the audience into the milieu of the Russian nineteenth century, with which he is fascinated. Second, he wants to convince readers of the importance of neglected themes or ideas in the work of one or another writer or thinker, to broaden the audience's understanding of the variety and complexity of Russian culture beyond the audience's casual reading or knowledge of Tolstoy or Dostoevsky.

Although Berlin rarely makes direct reference to the reality of the Soviet Union, its existence is the background for every one of the essays in this collection. Although Berlin is an unapologetic literary and political scholar, convinced of the value of delving into past figures, even forgotten or less-important ones, the content of all his investigations is the triumph of Communism in Russia and what it means for the continued existence of liberalism, in which Berlin wants to continue to believe, but without any illusions of utopianism, even the residual illusions of that great skeptic Herzen. Furthermore, many of the cultural conflicts Berlin describes have re-emerged in post-Soviet Russia, especially the perpetual conflict between the "Westernizers" and "Slavophils."

Tone

Berlin's tone is serious, yet playful and detached. He assumes what, to today's readers, may look like a great deal of knowledge about Russian society and writers, but it was was in fact what most listeners at a public lecture would have known in the mid-twentieth century, concerned as it was with the origins and threat of Soviet Communism. Berlin's tone resembles that of Alexander Herzen, whose thought Berlin evidently admires. Berlin describes Herzen as a witty conversationalist and a sometime malicious observer of his friends. But he most admires Herzen's refusal to accept the illusions and pseudo-certainties of the "new men," violent revolutionaries impatient with talk and analysis. Like Turgenev, Berlin has a gift for entering into the views and sympathies of those with whom he may not agree, so that whole paragraphs of his essays paraphrase writings from the mid-nineteenth-century. Part of the reason why Berlin does this, of

course, is that there were no English translations of some of the materials Berlin was quoting or paraphrasing.

Structure

The book is a collection of essays published in various academic journals from the 1940's to the 1970's. However, many of the essays are united by the same thematic concerns and even phrases and quotes that travel between them.

Quotes

"The experience obtained by both sides in the struggle during those dark years [after 1848] was a decisive factor in shaping the uncompromising character of the later revolutionary movement in Russia."
—Isaiah Berlin, ""Russia and 1848," 21.

"For there exists a great chasm between those who, on one side, who related everything to a single central vision, one system less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel—a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say had significance—and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and completely contradictory, connected, if at all, only in dome de facto way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related by no moral or aesthetic principle; these last lead lives, perform acts, and entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal, their thought is scattered and diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, to exclude them from, any one unchanging all-embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fanatical, unitary inker vision."
—Isaiah Berlin, "The Hedgehog and the Fox," 22.

"The hypothesis I wish to offer is that Tolstoy was by nature a fox, but believed in being a hedgehog; that his gifts and achievements are one thing, and his beliefs, and consequently his interpretation of his own achievement, another; and that consequently his ideals have led him, and those whom his genius for persuasion has taken in, into a systematic misrepresentation of what he and others were doing or should be doing."
—Isaiah Berlin, "The Hedgehog and the Fox," 24.

"As Tolstoy moved away from literature to polemical writing this tendency became increasingly prominent: the irritated awareness at the back of his mind that no final solution was ever, in principle, to be found, caused Tolstoy to attack the bogus solutions all the more savagely for the false comfort the offered—and fro being an insult to the intelligence. Tolstoy's purely intellectual genius for this kind of lethal activity was very great and exceptional, and all his life he looked for some edifice strong enough to resist his engines of destruction and his mines and battering rams; he wished to be stopped by an immovable obstacle, he wished his violent projectiles to be resisted by impregnable fortifications."

"Opposed as Tolstoy and Maistre were—on the apostle of the gospel that all men are brothers, the other the cold defender of the claims of violence, blind sacrifice, and eternal suffering—they were united by inability to escape from the same tragic paradox: they were both by nature sharp-eyed foxes, inescapably aware of sheer, de facto differences which divide and forces which disrupt the human world, observers utterly incapable of being deceived by the many subtle devices, the unifying systems and faiths

and sciences, by which the superficial or desperate sought to conceal the chaos from themselves or from one another."
—Isaiah Berlin "The Hedgehog and the Fox," 80.

"Most of the Intelligentsia regarded their destructive criticism as a mere preliminary the clearing of the ground for some great ideological construction; Berlin sees it as thoroughly relevant for our own time, when only a consistent pluralism can protect human freedom from the depredations of the systematisers [sic]."
—Aileen Douglas, Introduction, xviii - xix.

"In an age when liberals and radicals alike were complacent in their faith in the inevitability of progress, when political choices seemed mapped out in advance by inexorable historical forces - the laws governing economic markets, or the conflict of social classes - which could be made to assume responsibility for their results, Turgenev perceived the hollowness of the certainties invoked by liberals to justify the injustices of the existing order, or by radicals to justify its merciless destruction."
Aileen Douglas, Introduction, xxi, xxii.

"Every Russian writer was made conscious that he was on a public stage, testifying; so that the smallest lapse on his part, a lie, a deception, an act of self-indulgence, lack of zeal for the truth, was a heinous crime."
—Berlin, "Birth of the Russian Intelligentsia," 129.

"There was a very self-conscious sense of literary and moral solidarity among [the intellectuals of the 1840's], which created between them a feeling of genuine fraternity and of purpose which certainly no other society in Russia has ever had."
—Berlin, "Birth of the Russian Intelligentsia," 135.

"Books and ideas to Belinsky were crucial events, matters of life and death, salvation and damnation, and he therefore reacted to them with the most devastating violence.He was by temperament not religious, not a naturalist, not an aesthete, nor a scholar. He was a moralist, secular and anti-clerical through and through."
—Berlin, "Vissarion Belinsky," 157.

"Belinsky, who intellectually was so ardent a Westerner, was emotionally more deeply and unhappily Russian than any of his contemporaries, spoke no foreign languages, could not breathe freely in any environment save that of Russia, and felt miserable and persecution-ridden abroad."
—Berlin, "Vissarion Belinsky," 179.

"The central populist goals were social justice and social equality. Most of them were convinced, following Herzen, whose revolutionary propoaganda in the 1850's influenced them more than any other single set of ideas, that the essence of a just and equal society existed already in the Russian peasant commune - the obshchina organized in the form of a collective unit called the mir. The mir was a free association of peasants which periodically redistributed the agricultural land to be tilled; its decision bound all its members, and constituted the cornerstone on which, so the populists maintained, a

federation of socialised [sic], self-governing units, conceived along line popularized by the French socialist Proudhon, could be erected."
—Berlin, "Russian Populism," 211.

Topics for Discussion

In all these essays, Berlin makes little direct reference to the Communist revolution and its aftermath in the Soviet state, although he was writing from the 1940's to the 1970's. How do his essays, especially his main theme of tension between "monism" and "pluralism," relate to the Soviet reality of the time? How much knowledge does he assume in his audiences? (Remember, these essays appeared from the 1940's to the 1970's.)

How important is "religiosity" to the thinkers and writers discussed here? Would it be fair to say that a quest for religious commitment and certitude is an important element for all these thinkers, even the "secular" ones such as Herzen? Explain with examples.

Given only what you've learned from these essays, would you say Hegel's system was a "religion" or not? How did it influence its adherents? Support your answer from the essays.

Why did politics become displaced into literature during Russia in the nineteenth century?

Why did the revolutionaries of the 1860's and 1870's turn away from, and reject, the earlier liberals of the 1840's such as Herzen and Turgenev?

How did Nicholas I's repression of Russian life, including cultural life, after the failed 1848 revolutions affect the Russian revolutionary tradition?

Why does the word "guilt" never appear in Berlin's essay, "Tolstoy and Enlightenment"? Why should it?

Why does Berlin compare Herzen and Bakunin? Which figure does he think had the greater influence on later generations, and why?

What was the appeal of Vissarion Belinsky, and why did he have such an enormous influence on later Russian radicals and intellectuals? Why do you think he was still controversial in Russia at the time Berlin was writing (1970's)?

What can you tell about Isaiah Berlin's own political beliefs from any one of these essays? Who does he admire, and why?

Why did the figure of Bazarov in Turgenev's Fathers and Children (1862) provoke such a tremendous controversy in Russian society, one that, according to Berlin, was still raging in the 1970's?