What is to be done?

a novel by N. G. CHERNYSHEVSKY

Introduction by E. H. CARR

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WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Tales

ABOUT NEW PEOPLE

BY

N. G. CHERNYSHEVSKY

INTRODUCTION BY E. H. CARR

The BENJAMIN R. TUCKER *translation*

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WHAT

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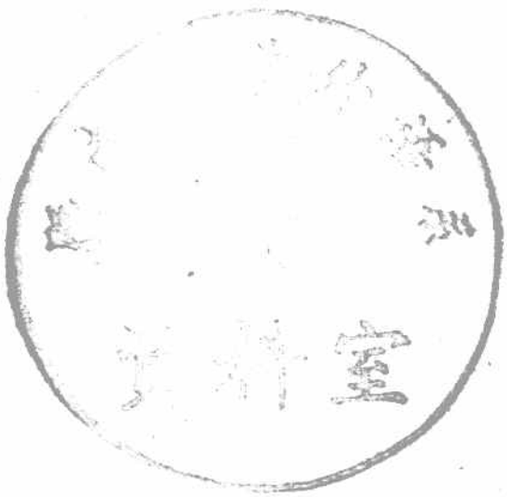

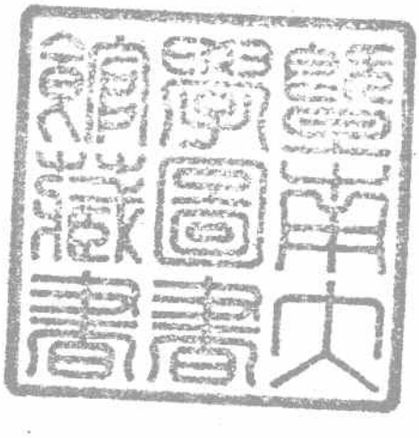

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TO

My Friend O. S. Ch.

Introduction

1960

The author of *What Is To Be Done?*, Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky, was a typical member—one might even say, *the* typical member—of the Russian revolutionary intelligentsia of the second half of the nineteenth century. He was dogmatic and self-assured, self-sacrificing to the point of Quixotry, earnest to the point of humorlessness, a fervent believer in the power of reason and of ideas, but also prepared for any action, however reckless and far-reaching, which seemed rationally designed to promote the great cause of progress. He was the son of a priest—this also was a characteristic trait—and was born in 1828 in the Volga town of Saratov. At the age of eighteen he found his way to the University of Petersburg, and there he witnessed from afar the European revolutions of 1848, which were the turning-point in his life and in his beliefs. From then on, he became a dedicated radical and revolutionary.

After a brief period as a teacher Chernyshevsky turned to a literary career, and from 1854 onward was one of the regular and most effective contributors to the progressive journal *Sovremennik* (*The Contemporary*), Belinsky's old organ. The moment was propitious. The death of Nicholas I in 1855 and the relaxation of censorship and repression which marked the first years of Alexander II enabled Chernyshevsky to abandon the literary and aesthetic essays, which were the first cloak for his advanced opinions, for the open discussion of the crucial problems of agrarian pol-

icy and of the peasant commune. Presently he became involved in the organization of underground activities. In the fresh wave of reaction which followed the proclamation of the emancipation of the serfs he was arrested in 1862. For more than eighteen months he remained in the Peter-and-Paul fortress; and it was here that he wrote *What Is To Be Done?* In 1864—the year in which the novel was published—he was sent to hard labor in Siberia, where he remained till 1883. Then he was allowed to live in Astrakhan, and eventually—a few months before his death in 1889—to return to his native town of Saratov. During this long postscript to his active political life he continued to record his impressions in letters and diaries, and even occasionally for publication. But the important part of his literary career is concentrated in the years 1854 to 1862, with *What Is To Be Done?* as its culminating point.

Chernyshevsky marked the transition from the group known in nineteenth-century Russian intellectual history as "the men of the forties" to "the men of the sixties," of whom he could claim to have been the first. "The men of the forties"—Bakunin, Herzen, Ogarev, Turgenev, Belinsky, with all their differences, all belonged to this group—were in essence members of the last generation of the Romantics. Politically, they were reared in the tradition of constitutional western liberalism; philosophically, in the tradition of the German idealists, mainly Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. Reacting against the backwardness, the harshness, and the obscurantism of the Russia of the Tsars, finding their lodestar in an idealized picture of the liberty, equality, and fraternity of the West, they failed to evolve any concrete program, whether of reform or of revolution, for their own country. They often seemed to be concerned more with individual self-improvement than with the reconstruction of Russian society, which was abandoned or neglected as a hopeless task. The derisive label applied to them by "the men of the sixties" which stuck most closely was "the cult of the beautiful soul."

The European revolutions of 1848-9 were the dividing-line between the two Russian generations. Except for Belinsky, who died in Russia in 1847, all the important "men of the forties" had gone to western Europe as temporary or permanent *émigrés*. Bakunin, arrested in Saxony, spent more than ten vital years in the dungeons of three countries

and in Siberia, and reappeared in western Europe only after the new lines of demarcation had been drawn. Only Herzen and Turgenev remained to defend in their different ways the outmoded tradition of the forties against the challenge of the younger generation.

Chernyshevsky had begun his public career as an ardent admirer and disciple of Herzen. At the end of the 1850's when Herzen accepted at its face value the "thaw" of the first years of Alexander's reign and seemed ready to come to terms with the reforming autocrat, the breach occurred between Herzen and Chernyshevsky which marked the opening of hostilities between the generations. Herzen in a famous article of 1859 in his London journal *The Bell*, under the title (in English) "Very Dangerous!!," branded the intransigent radicalism of Chernyshevsky and his friends in Russia. A visit by Chernyshevsky to Herzen in London only hardened the antipathy between them. Nor did it improve matters when, after the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 and the Polish insurrection two years later, Herzen was forced to admit that the reforming zeal of Alexander II had been skin-deep and had only skimmed the surface of the autocracy. By this time the rift between the cautious liberals of the forties and the angry young radicals of the sixties was too deep to be bridged.

The men of the sixties proudly thought of themselves as rejecting sentimental romanticism for hard-headed realism, philosophical idealism for materialism, metaphysics for science. Though the ideas of the western European "Enlightenment" had penetrated Russian court circles under Catherine the Great, they had made little impact on Russian life or on Russian politics; and the cult of reason which played so fundamental a role in Chernyshevsky's thinking was in some respects only a belated afterglow of the vision which had dawned on France and western Europe in the eighteenth century. Helvétius, Diderot, and Rousseau—the Rousseau of *Emile* and *La Nouvelle Héloïse* rather than of the *Confessions* and the *Social Contract*—were among Chernyshevsky's early gods. The intellectual movement of the 1860's had some claim to be called Russia's Age of Reason.

But it was Reason cast in a new mold. This was preeminently the age of the supreme cult of science. Chernyshevsky had been an early Russian devotee of Feuerbach (*"man ist was man isst"*). But it was that once famous bible

of materialism, Büchner's *Kraft und Stoff*, published in Germany in 1855 and quickly circulated in Russia in illicit translations, which satisfied the young Russians of the 1860's that human life and human behavior were to be explained in material and physiological terms, and that the reform of society was in the strictest sense a scientific problem. Rather surprisingly, Chernyshevsky dismissed Comte as superficial, and was shocked by the deductions which some social thinkers were beginning to draw from Darwin's survival of the fittest. But this was because he felt himself to possess a simpler and more direct key to the problems of society. The question of morality seemed to him to have been solved once for all by the English Utilitarians, known to him principally through John Stuart Mill, whom he translated. Nothing else could be expected, and nothing else was needed, than the pursuit by every individual of his rational and enlightened self-interest. Like Buckle, Chernyshevsky attributed misconduct to ignorance.

The use of fiction for the discussion and dissemination of social ideas was already a Russian nineteenth-century tradition. Herzen in the forties, before his departure from Russia, had written a short and not very successful novel, *Who Is To Blame?*, which attempted to analyze the eternal triangle in the naïve terms of a rational morality. In 1862 Turgenev, quickly sensitive to the appearance on the scene of the young men of the sixties, had introduced a caricature of one of them, under the name Bazarov, into his novel *Fathers and Sons*, applying to him, and putting into popular circulation for the first time, the title of "nihilist." Bazarov is the classic example of the type: indeed, one may suspect that this is a case where a caricature of genius helped to create the type. Bazarov constantly insists on his mission: he is a man dedicated to a cause—"no ordinary man." His creed is science plus rational morality: he "does not believe in principles, but believes in frogs," and thinks that "a decent chemist is twenty times more useful than any poet." Chernyshevsky's *What Is To Be Done?* is not so much a retort to *Fathers and Sons* as a proud acceptance of it. His principal characters are reincarnations of Bazarov. Lopukhóv spurns "what are called lofty feelings, ideal impulses," and exalts "the striving of every man for his own advantage." Kirsánov (the very name is borrowed from Turgenev) treats "pompous words like honor" as "ambiguous and ob-

scure," and proclaims that "every man is an egoist." Rakhmétov, introduced in a chapter entitled "An Unusual Man," eats beef to make himself strong, sleeps on nails to harden himself for the tasks ahead, and, like Bazarov, adopts a deliberately brusque manner of conversation lest he should waste time unnecessarily on empty words and formalities.

Almost everything about *What Is To Be Done?* is disconcerting to the modern western reader. Its form is that of a highly discursive Victorian English novel. Its original subtitle, *Tales about New People,* should warn the reader against expecting a single unitary plot. It wanders from theme to theme, minor characters appear and disappear, new major characters are suddenly introduced at the whim of the author. The one character who runs throughout the story, and round whom the action revolves, is the heroine, Véra Pávlovna; but three quarters of the way through, a secondary heroine (with her attendant hero) appears in the person of Katerína, and for some time occupies the center of the stage. If symmetry and order were essential qualities of art, *What Is To Be Done?* could not be ranked as a work of art. The author holds conversations with the "perceptive reader," buttonholing him in the distressingly arch manner of Thackeray, whom he more than once quotes with admiration (an admiration tempered by the just criticism of sameness and lack of breadth—everything that he has to say is in *Vanity Fair,* and the rest mere repetition). But he does not even pick up the scattered threads of his story in the last chapter with the formal tidiness of the Victorian novelist. (It ends in a bewildering and incomprehensible Walpurgis Night of Reason, with a nameless Woman in Black leading the abstemious revels, and in the half-mocking promise of a second part—which was, of course, never written. This material is omitted from the present edition.)

The other disconcerting factor for the contemporary reader is Chernyshevsky's attitude to a question which has become the predominant obsession of the mid-twentieth-century western novelist. The Victorian novelist, like Victorian society, veiled the physical relations between the sexes in a cloud of prudery. But neither he nor his reader for a moment questioned their importance; they were merely transposed by the convention of the period into a sentimental key. The attitude of Chernyshevsky is quite different. He does not mince his words when he brings onto

the stage a reformed prostitute or the mistress of a rich man. But in a book which is constantly—one might almost say, primarily—concerned with the relation, and specifically the marital relation, between men and women, he dismisses the physical aspect of that relation as unessential and not seriously worth discussion. He had already made his standpoint clear in a review of Turgenev's story "Asia":

> Away with erotic problems. The modern reader has no interest in them. He is concerned with the question of perfecting the administration and the judicial system, with financial questions, with the problem of liberating the peasant.

The descriptions of life in *What Is To Be Done?* lead us to suppose that Véra Pávlovna has no physical relations with her first husband, Lopukhóv, such relations being incompatible with their rational conception of human behavior. Certain passages might support the inference that she and her second husband, Kirsánov, conducted themselves more normally. But Chernyshevsky nowhere makes this point explicit, as he would have done if had thought it important; and it would be a complete anachronism to seek here an explanation of the breakdown of Véra's first marriage. Another strange feature of *What Is To Be Done?* comes into the picture at this point. In the endless discussions about marriage in which Véra Pávlovna and her two successive partners engage, no hint occurs anywhere that marriage commonly results in offspring or that this may be one of its functions. The leading characters of the novel have parents, but no children. In one place only, in reporting a conversation of the secondary heroine Katerína a few years after her marriage in which she casually mentions her son, the author adds, without further elaboration, in an almost comic parenthesis: "So she has a son." So passionate a believer as Chernyshevsky in the future of the human race must have wanted and expected children to be produced. But he would clearly have liked them to be produced in some way which impinged less disturbingly on the rational human personality. All this creates an embarrassing impression of lack not only of sophistication but also of common sense, especially when Chernyshevsky describes his characters diverting themselves in harmless merriment. Again

and again the reader is tempted to exclaim in the language of Byron:

O Mirth and Innocence! O Milk and Water!

But the Russian revolutionaries were not innocents abroad, and were anything but milk-and-water characters. What was the inspiration which they found in *What Is To Be Done?* and what made it for more than fifty years a major revolutionary classic? It is not easy to label Chernyshevsky. A nihilist he was certainly not—except in the sense that every Russian radical and progressive believed automatically in the total destruction of the existing order of Russian society. Chernyshevsky is generally counted as a *narodnik* or "populist" (to use the conventional English equivalent); for that term covers a wealth of different ideas and a chaotic, amorphous movement of revolt. But Chernyshevsky lacked the idealization of the Russian peasant commune which was often regarded as the hallmark of "populism." He was more interested in the town than in the country; and this has helped to establish the picture of him in current Soviet tradition as an embryonic Russian Marxist. Nor does Chernyshevsky show anything of the common desire of the populists to glorify Russia at the expense of the bourgeois and decadent West. He had no Slavophile leanings and remained, in terms of Russian thought, an unrepentant westerner. The keynotes of all his writing, and what succeeding generations of revolutionaries above all found in him, were faith in socialism, faith in progress, and faith in reason.

Socialism was the term which all Russian radicals, from Herzen onward, applied to their vision of the society of the future. Negatively, it carried with it the firm rejection of western bourgeois democracy and western capitalism. Positively, early Russian socialism was nourished on the imaginary societies and commonwealths of the French utopians, of whom Fourier, with his "phalansteries" and his psychological speculations about the transformation of human nature, was the most popular and influential in Russia. In a country where any kind of political activity was taboo, socialism long remained in its utopian and purely imaginative stage. The economic background of *What Is To Be Done?* is provided by the co-operatives of seamstresses formed by the heroine and described in loving detail. From

the socialist economy the features of profit, competition, and exploitation inherent in capitalism will disappear; and the welfare of the new community will be solidly built on equal co-operation and mutual aid among the workers engaged in production. Here Chernyshevsky provides an urban counterpart for the "going to the people" in the villages which was so characteristic a feature of the populist movement. Two generations of Chernyshevsky's readers were satisfied and inspired by this unsophisticated picture of selfless human endeavor.

Faith in progress and in the ultimate attainment of the goal is common to all the characters in *What Is To Be Done?* Here, too, Chernyshevsky harks back to the Enlightenment, and may be regarded as the disciple of Condorcet quite as much as of Darwin. Progress remains for him a basic assumption, an article of belief, rather than something that calls for scientific proof. A pathetic letter written to his wife from Siberia in 1871, after nine years of imprisonment and exile, attests both his faith in the future and his faith in his own mission:

> Poor Russian people, a miserable fate awaits it in this struggle. But the result will be favorable, and then, my dear, it will have need of truth. I am no longer a young man, but remember that our life is still ahead of us. . . . I can speak of historical events because I have learned and thought much. My turn will come. We will then see whether it is worth complaining about the fact that for so many years I have only been able to study and think. We will then see that this has been useful for our country.*

But, most of all, it is faith in human reason which served as the *leitmotif* of *What Is To Be Done?* and as the inspiration which drove men and women to do and to suffer in the sacred cause of the revolution. Reason had given man the power to master and transform his material environment: the wonders of science were unbounded. But reason, it now seemed clear, had also given man the power to transform himself and, in transforming himself, to transform

* Quoted from F. Venturi: *Roots of Revolution* (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1960), p. 184. This work contains the best recent account of Chernyshevsky in English.

society. Like most Russians, Chernyshevsky was not an individualist in the sense of setting up any sharp opposition between society and the individual: to transform one meant to transform the other. When Chernyshevsky speaks of the "new men," he is thinking also of the new society which they will build.

The theme of the "new men" runs as a guiding thread through the pages of *What Is To Be Done?* Six years ago, remarks Chernyshevsky with odd precision, the new type of man did not yet exist. His predecessors (these are still "the men of the forties") "felt themselves alone, powerless, and were therefore inactive, or despondent, or exalted, or indulged in romanticism and fantasy." The new man is marked by "cold-blooded practicality, regular and calculating activity, active calculation." The characters in *What Is To Be Done?* are "new men" carried, as we have seen, to the extreme point of logical consistency. The heroine, Véra Pávlovna, is "one of the first women whose life has been ordered well." These people were the harbingers of the new society. At present there were still ten "antediluvians" to one modern man. But "the number of decent people grows every year," and soon "all people will be decent people."

The faith and optimism of Chernyshevsky are thus simpler, more direct, and more naïve than the faith and optimism of Marx. Marx believed in the forces of history working themselves out through the actions of men to a goal that could be foreseen. This, too, was belief in reason, but in a less personal reason than that which occupied the central place in Chernyshevsky's thought. For Chernyshevsky it was human ignorance rather than the interested resistance of those in possession which was the ultimate obstacle to progress. But this conviction also brought a message of hope. The task of the revolutionaries was to instruct and transform human beings, to make "decent people" of them, by persuading them to harken to the voice of reason.

There is no doubt about the potency of this message in the time and circumstances in which it was delivered. Even Turgenev, who complained that Chernyshevsky did not "understand poetry," admitted that he understood "the needs of real contemporary life." It was Chernyshevsky more than any other one man who shaped the moral attitudes of two

generations of Russian revolutionaries. Lenin hailed him as "a great Russian socialist" (though still a "utopian socialist") and undoubtedly regarded him as one of the precursors of Bolshevism. Lenin's ideal revolutionary would have lived as Chernyshevsky's heroes and heroines lived. It should not be forgotten that Chernyshevsky's one novel was written in prison in the first year of his long martyrdom for his convictions. These grim surroundings were the birthplace not only of *What Is To Be Done?* but also of the whole revolutionary movement. It is neither accidental nor surprising that this gray, austere, humorless utopia—a reflection of these conditions—should have set the tone for the human and personal side of the revolution.

E. H. Carr

Translator's Preface

1883

This novel, the last work and only novel from Chernyshevsky's pen, originally appeared in 1863 in a St. Petersburg magazine, the author writing it at that time in a St. Petersburg dungeon, where he was confined for twenty-two months prior to being sent into exile in Siberia by the cruel Tsar who has since paid the penalty of this crime and many others. This martyr-hero of the modern Revolution still languishes in a remote corner of that cheerless country, his health ruined and—if report be true—his mind shattered by his long solitude and enforced abstention from literary and revolutionary work. The present Tsar, true son of his father, persistently refuses to mitigate his sentence, despite the petition for Chernyshevsky's freedom sent not long ago to Alexander III by the literary celebrities of the world gathered in international congress at Vienna.

The Russian Nihilists regard the present work as a faithful portraiture of themselves and their movement, and as such they contrast it with the celebrated *Fathers and Sons* of Turgenev, which they consider rather as a caricature. The fundamental idea of Chernyshevsky's work is that woman is a human being and not an animal created for man's benefit, and its chief purpose is to show the superiority of free unions between men and women over the indissoluble marriage sanctioned by Church and State. It may almost be considered a continuation of the great Herzen's novel, *Who Is To Blame?*, written fifteen years before on the same subject.