



N.G. CHERNYSHEVSKY

SELECTED
PHILOSOPHICAL
ESSAYS

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FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

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N. G. CHERNYSHEVSKY'S WORLD OUTLOOK

Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky, the great revolutionary democrat and forerunner of Russian Social-Democracy, was an outstanding scientist and a profound and original thinker. His materialist philosophy marked the peak of pre-Marxian philosophy. He stood very high in the estimation of V. I. Lenin, who wrote that he was "the only really great Russian writer who, from the fifties until 1888, was able to keep on the level of an integral philosophical materialism and who spurned the wretched nonsense of the Neo-Kantians, positivists, Machians and other muddleheads." * Marx carefully studied the works of Chernyshevsky and called him the "great Russian scholar and critic." ** Comrade Stalin has mentioned him among the most distinguished representatives of the great Russian nation.

Being a revolutionist, Chernyshevsky never studied philosophical problems in the abstract. Science and philosophy served him as weapons in the struggle for revolutionary-democratic changes, in the struggle against tsarism and serfdom. He brought up and elaborated philosophical problems in the light of the concrete needs of revolutionary-democratic practice. His was a new attitude towards philosophy.

Chernyshevsky understood perfectly well that the victory of the people and the ideals of emancipation could be achieved only by revolutionary struggle, by revolutionary political activity. To this political struggle he devoted all his life; it was the starting point of all his theoretical work. For him, theoretical work was one of the forms of the revolutionary struggle, and it always had a definite practical aim.

Thus, Chernyshevsky's philosophy was a philosophy of life, a philosophy of revolutionary action and struggle.

* V. I. Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Moscow 1952, p. 377.

** K. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 19.

It was not expounded in textbooks on the history of philosophy and logic, or taught in universities and academies; it was disseminated through newspaper and magazine articles, and in these essays, reviews and comments on the most diverse questions, which were always of lively and topical interest, Chernyshevsky gave what for his time was a profound scientific explanation of reality.

The name of N. G. Chernyshevsky is closely associated with the social-political movement of the "sixties" in Russia. As Chernyshevsky himself stated, the "sixties" was the period when the peasant question, i.e., the question of emancipating the serfs, had become "the sole subject of all thoughts and of all conversation."* The fact that the peasant question was the central question in that period was an indication of the deep social changes that were taking place in Russia at that time. Economic development was pushing Russia on to the path of capitalism. This found expression in the fairly rapid development of industry in the towns, the growth of the elements of capitalism in feudal-landlord farming and of commodity relationships in peasant farming. The development of capitalist relationships in Russia was hindered by age-old feudal relationships, and particularly by serfdom. The further untrammelled development of capitalism called primarily for a mass of free workers. The necessity of expanding the home market, of developing trade and the money system, of introducing new techniques and machines in production, and in agriculture in particular, in short, the needs of developing capitalism, came into direct conflict with the prevailing feudal relationships. Russia's defeat in the Crimean War (1853-56) glaringly revealed the utter wretchedness and backwardness of the Russian serf system. The tsarist autocracy was compelled to take the path of "reform" from above, the more so that revolutionary unrest in the country, primarily the spontaneous peasant "revolts," threatened the autocracy and the serf system with more radical changes from below.

Thus, "the force of economic development, which was drawing Russia on the path of capitalism,"** brought the

* N. G. Chernyshevsky, *Collected Works*, Russ. ed., Vol. I, 1906, p. 87.

** V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 4th Russ. ed., Vol. 17, p. 95.

peasant question into the forefront, and the way this question was settled was to determine the character and path of development of capitalism in Russia. It was quite natural, therefore, that this fundamental question should have become the point of collision of the principal classes in Russian society at that time.

The ruling landlord class was unable to withstand the rising tide of peasant revolt; the serf-owners "could no longer retain the old, tottering forms of economy";* on the other hand they realized that if they themselves took measures to change the forms of serfdom, they could make the incipient development of capitalism serve their own interests.

The "divergent" interests of the various groups among the nobility in connection with the reform did not concern the principle of "emancipation," but only the method of carrying it out. As Lenin observed: "The notorious struggle between the serf-owners and the liberals, which was so exaggerated and embellished by our liberal and liberal-Narodnik historians, was an *internal* struggle among the ruling classes, chiefly an *internal struggle among the landlords, exclusively* over the extent and form of the *concessions*."** There was agreement between the reactionary landlords and the liberals on the main point, namely, the land: landlordism was to remain, the peasants were to have no right to land, and all the measures for the "emancipation" of the serfs were to be carried out in the name of the tsar. Both the diehards and the liberals stood for the "emancipation" of the serfs "from above." This meant the gradual reform of the serf system, its adaptation to the new conditions of capitalism; such was the path the landlord and liberal sections of Russian society of that time stood for.

This determined the class content of the so-called "peasant reform." As Lenin wrote: "The 'peasant reform' was a bourgeois reform carried out by the serf-owners. It was a step in the direction of transforming Russia into a bourgeois monarchy. The content of the peasant reform was bourgeois...."*** Chernyshevsky fully appreciated the bourgeois character of this reform; in his celebrated article "Unad-

* *Ibid.*

** *Ibid.*, p. 96.

*** *Ibid.*, p. 95.

dressed Letters," he wrote: "... The powers that be [i.e., the serf-owning landlords—*M. G.*] undertook to carry out a program that was not their own [i.e., it was the program of the bourgeoisie—*M.G.*], a program based on principles out of harmony with the character of these powers." The inevitable result of this was "a change in the forms of relationship between the landlords and the peasants, with only a slight, almost imperceptible, change in the content of this relationship.... The intention was to preserve the content of serfdom and to abolish only its forms." *

Lenin wrote: "It required the genius of a Chernyshevsky to understand so clearly at that time, when the peasant reform was only being introduced (when it had not yet been properly elucidated even in Western Europe), that its character was fundamentally bourgeois, that even at that time Russian 'society' and the Russian 'state' were ruled and governed by social classes which were irreconcilably hostile to the toilers and which undoubtedly made the ruin and expropriation of the peasantry a foregone conclusion." **

Lenin noted that in the period when the "peasant reform" was carried out a revolutionary situation existed in Russia. During the years immediately preceding the reform there had been a steady increase in the revolutionary activity of the serf-peasant masses, and after the promulgation of the Manifesto of February 19, 1861, proclaiming the abolition of serfdom, these activities, far from subsiding, grew in intensity. The peasantry's profound disappointment with the character of the "reform" carried out by the ruling class stirred up a new revolutionary wave in the country. In many places the peasants reacted to their "emancipation" by open unrest, disorders and revolts. For example, when the Manifesto was proclaimed, an insurrection broke out in the village of Bezdna, in the Kazan Gubernia, which was cruelly suppressed by the armed forces of the tsar.

Unrest also broke out in the principal centres of the country. The underground revolutionary forces widely extended their activities. Large quantities of secretly printed leaflets and manifestoes appeared, calling for a deter-

* N. G. Chernyshevsky, *Collected Works*, Russ. ed., Vol. X, Part 2, 1906, pp. 301-302.

** V. I. Lenin, *What the "Friends of the People" Are and How They Fight the Social-Democrats*, Moscow 1951, p. 258.

mined struggle to overthrow tsarism. For example, a clergyman named Belyustin wrote to Pogodin: "Seditious manifestoes are pouring down like hail.... These manifestoes are being distributed chiefly by the hungry youth among the civil service people. Among them there are *hosts* of proletarians. They are all future sansculottes." "The *pocket printing presses* are working tirelessly...."

Underground revolutionary literature also spread to the provincial towns and to the rural districts. In the Chernigov Gubernia, copies of Herzen's *Baptised Property* and other of his works were found among peasants. Belinsky's "Letter to Gogol," and copies of the *Sovremennik* * containing essays by Chernyshevsky and Dobrolyubov passed from hand to hand. The dissemination of revolutionary-democratic ideas by means of political manifestoes, essays and literature had a stimulating effect upon the minds of the advanced section of Russian society and roused it for the struggle against the conditions that oppressed and degraded human individuality.

One of the important manifestations of the rising revolutionary tide in the period we are discussing was the student movement. Despite the repressive measures taken by the authorities and the efforts of the reactionary section of the professors to foster among the mass of the students the spirit of submission and loyalty to the tsar, the minds of the young people were dominated by the ideas propounded by Belinsky, Herzen and Chernyshevsky. Things reached such a pitch that the tsar issued an order that the universities be temporarily closed.

The crisis in the "upper circles" expressed itself in the attempts of the ruling landlord class to "renovate" the country by means of what were in essence bourgeois reforms. We have already spoken of these reforms. It must be emphasized once again that the ruling upper circles were compelled to take this step by their fear of the revolutionary initiative of the "lower classes." Political and moral confusion reigned in the ruling circles. But the temporal and spiritual agents of tsarism were not the only ones to be filled with fear and alarm; the liberal critics, professors and writers also hastened to the side of "law and order." From the moment it arose, Russian liberalism, to its eter-

* See Note 5 to "Polemical Gems."—Ed.

nal disgrace, displayed abject loyalty to tsarism. Unite at all cost—everybody, from the most reactionary serf-owners to bourgeois liberals, rally in one camp—this became their most urgent slogan of the day. Shevryyov wrote from his deathbed in Paris: "It is a pity that Aksakov and Katkov are quarrelling. This is not the time for quarrelling. Pride must be thrust aside." Katkov, displeased with Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, and regarding Bazarov, the hero in this novel, as an apologist of the *Sovremennik*, wrote: "... Remember that in addition to art there is also the political question. Who can tell what this fellow can turn into?"

The united camp of counterrevolution was fully aware of the direction from which the chief danger threatened it, and who was the ideological inspirer of the ever-spreading revolutionary movement. It was Chernyshevsky, the finest representative of the revolutionary commoners who had taken the place of the revolutionaries of the nobility.

Chernyshevsky was, indeed, the generally recognized leader of the revolutionary-democratic trend. His activities reflected the fundamental interests of the vast masses of the Russian peasantry and their struggle against serfdom and tsarism. Chernyshevsky consistently and resolutely fought autocracy and serfdom, ruthlessly exposed the Russian liberals, and strove to formulate from the point of view of advanced science of his time the conduct, the tactics and strategy of the democratic revolutionaries who were at the head of the peasant revolution. Chernyshevsky was the central figure who most fully and comprehensively reflected that revolutionary epoch.

That is why he earned the bitter hatred of the Russian feudal landlords and of the Russian liberals who followed in their wake. That is why they resorted to every despicable means to attack him: open persecution, denunciation, blackmail and provocation. So eager were Chernyshevsky's class enemies to bring about his destruction that they even accused the tsarist police authorities of being tardy and irresolute. In an anonymous letter to Potapov of the Third Department, i.e., the Secret Service, somebody wrote: "Rid us of Chernyshevsky for the sake of public peace."

But right to the end Chernyshevsky remained at his fighting post, the post of great leader of the peasant

revolution. He fought his enemies not only in the political field, but also in the ideological, the theoretical field. His superiority over them as a theoretician was undisputed. He was always the victor in the ideological battles he fought against them: the aesthetes among the critics Dudyskin and Druzhinin; the economist Vernadsky, the ideologist of the Russian bourgeoisie; the bourgeois professor and "guardian" Chicherin; the philosophizing obscurantist Yurkevich, and their ilk, for in his duels with them he was guided by the materialist and revolutionary-democratic world outlook.

The historical importance of Chernyshevsky's literary activities lies in that they most correctly generalized from the point of view of science of that time the revolutionary experience in Russia in the epoch of the profound crisis of the serf system. By this Chernyshevsky undoubtedly made an immense contribution to the development of revolutionary thought not only in his own country, but in all the advanced countries in the world. Marx studied Chernyshevsky's works on the "peasant reform" with special attention and expressed the opinion that they did "real honour to Russia." * For the importance of the services he rendered, Chernyshevsky has no equal in the history of the revolutionary movement before Marx, for his theoretical system reflected one of the most important and acute periods of human history and its direct purpose was to serve as a weapon of the broad masses of the people who were striving to abolish the feudal form of exploitation in a vast country like Russia. By his work in the field of theory, Chernyshevsky ideologically prepared the political revolution that was maturing in Russia in the sixties.

In his famous manifesto "To the Gentry's Peasants" he called upon the people to take up the axe as the only reliable means of achieving real emancipation, of abolishing serf dependence and oppression.

Thus, the object of Chernyshevsky's public and literary activities was to transform the peasant revolution from a possibility, as it was then, into reality. He tried to give the sporadic, spontaneous revolts of the peasants an organized character, and to take into account and utilize in the

* *The Correspondence of K. Marx and F. Engels with Russian Political Leaders*, Russ. ed., 1947, p. 29.

struggle against tsarism the revolutionary experience accumulated by the Russian people and also by the toiling masses in the West. His idea was that the victorious peasant revolution in Russia would deprive the landlords of all the land, abolish tsarism, and open the road for the socialist transformation of the country. His aim was to rouse the peasantry for a socialist revolution. This was the epoch when, as Lenin said, "democracy and socialism were merged in one inseparable and indissoluble whole...."

The revolution that Chernyshevsky envisaged, however, could only result in the thorough eradication of serfdom, in the organization of Russian society on the most consistent democratic basis, and in the opening of the road of development in Russia not for socialism, but for capitalism. Objectively, Chernyshevsky was the advocate of the revolutionary-democratic path of development as against the path of liberal compromise. His peasant revolutionary socialism was a form of utopian socialism. He linked socialism with the backward Russian village community.

As is known, the revolutionary situation of 1859-61 did not develop into revolution. At that time Russia still lacked that social class that is capable of bringing about a successful social revolution. The sporadic peasant revolts did not smash the tsarist regime. Reaction increased in the country. Chernyshevsky, the leader of the Russian revolutionary democrats, was arrested and sentenced to a long term of exile in Siberia.

Chernyshevsky is a landmark in the history of our people's liberation movement. "At first—nobles and landlords, the Decembrists and Herzen. This was a narrow circle of revolutionaries, very far removed from the people. But they did not work in vain. The Decembrists awakened Herzen. Herzen launched revolutionary agitation.

"This agitation was taken up, extended, strengthened, and tempered by the revolutionary commoners, beginning with Chernyshevsky and ending with the heroes of the 'Narodnaya Volya.' The circle of fighters widened, they established closer contacts with the people. 'The young helmsmen of the impending storm,' Herzen called them. But as yet it was not the storm itself.

"The storm is the movement of the masses themselves. The proletariat, the only class that is revolutionary to the end, rose at the head of the masses and for the first

time aroused millions of peasants to open revolutionary struggle." *

The Russian proletariat came out at the head of the liberation movement in Russia and raised the Russian revolution to a new and higher level. Under the guidance of the Communist Party, of its great leaders Lenin and Stalin, the Russian proletariat overthrew the rule of the landlords and the bourgeoisie and, in a stern struggle against all the enemies of the people, led our country to the victory of socialism.

* * *

The name of Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky is closely associated with the social revolutionary movement of the "sixties." True, he lived beyond that period, but he spent those later years in prison, penal servitude and exile. In this respect, the glorious life of this great Russian revolutionist was profoundly tragic. During his childhood and youth (1828-46) he lived in Saratov. After that, for five years (1846-50) he was a student of the History and Philological Faculty of the St. Petersburg University, and after graduating he, for two and a half years (1851-53), taught literature at a gymnasium in Saratov. He returned to St. Petersburg in 1853 and became a contributor to the magazine *Otechestvenniye Zapiski*. Later he began to contribute to the *Sovremennik* and soon became chief editor of this magazine, which at that time practically represented the radical-democratic movement.

In the *Sovremennik* he published his famous literary reviews: "Essays on the Gogol Period of Russian Literature," "Lessing and His Times," and "Pushkin"; his essays on history: "The July Monarchy," "The Conflict of Parties in France in the Reign of Louis XVIII and Charles X," and "Cavaignac"; his essays on philosophy: "The Anthropological Principle in Philosophy," and "A Criticism of the Philosophical Prejudices Against Common Ownership"; and his essays on political economy: "Comments on Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*" and "Outlines of Political Economy According to Mill." The "Comments" and "Outlines" are important in themselves, for in them

* V. I. Lenin, *Selected Works*, Two-Volume ed., Moscow 1952, Vol. I, Part 2, p. 280.

Chernyshevsky stands forth as a brilliant critic of bourgeois political economy. This was noted at the time by Marx, who wrote:

"... It is a declaration of bankruptcy by bourgeois economy, an event on which the great Russian scholar and critic, N. Tschernyschewsky, has thrown the light of a master mind in his 'Outlines of Political Economy According to Mill.'"

In 1862, Chernyshevsky was arrested for his revolutionary activities and confined in the Fortress of St. Peter and Paul. There he wrote his famous novel *What Is To Be Done?*, which served as a textbook for generations of revolutionists. In 1864 the tsarist authorities sentenced Chernyshevsky to "civil execution," (i.e., mock execution) followed by penal servitude (1864-72) and by exile to Vilyuisk (1872-83).

From Siberia he went to live in Astrakhan and a few months before he died he went to Saratov, but in both places the conditions for him were as stringent as they had been in Siberia. Chernyshevsky died on October 17, 1889, at the age of 61.

Thus, he spent more than half of his independent active life as a prisoner of the tsar. Heroically he bore his long isolation and the refined moral torture and physical privation to which he was subjected, and remained to the last moment an indomitable revolutionary and materialist thinker.

* * *

Of course, Chernyshevsky was brought up, and his mind was moulded, primarily under the influence of his Russian environment. The opinion, formerly widespread, and still held in some quarters, that his social-political and philosophical views were influenced entirely by the West totally contradicts the Marxist-Leninist view of the matter. There can be no doubt that the West, which was revolutionary at that time, did help to mould his mind to some extent; but it is perfectly obvious that in tracing Chernyshevsky's development as a revolutionist and thinker, we must

* K. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 19: Author's Preface to the Second Edition.

start from the social and ideological conditions in Russia in his time.

From his childhood Chernyshevsky had before him the gloomy picture of tyranny, cruelty and human suffering. The majority of unhappy and suffering people he saw in his childhood were serf peasants. Everyday life confronted him with the problem of the cause of the people's suffering and with the necessity of finding a way out of these unbearable conditions. An enormous factor in his mental development were the advanced Russian thinkers, particularly Herzen and Belinsky, with whose works he was already acquainted when he was in Saratov.

Chernyshevsky entered the St. Petersburg University with the firm intention of devoting himself to the noble and patriotic task of helping to develop science in Russia. He soon realized, however, that the chief obstacles to this were tsarism and serfdom. His attitude towards the autocracy and the serf system that prevailed in Russia took definite shape in his student years, and it was in this period that his revolutionary-democratic convictions took shape.

The struggle against serfdom and autocracy had been started by progressive Russian people long before that; in fact, it had never ceased in spite of the cruelties perpetrated by the tsarist authorities. This struggle found reflection in the works of the Russian poets and fiction writers which Chernyshevsky had eagerly read since his youth, and through which he became acquainted with the advanced democratic ideology that had developed in Russian society. This struggle found reflection particularly in journalism, which, owing to the conditions prevailing in the country was, perhaps, the only sphere where, resorting to every device to overcome the obstacles raised by the censorship, it was still possible to discuss urgent social problems. Shevryyov, one of the ideological servitors of tsarism, aptly described the role played by journalism in Russia when he wrote: "Is not a magazine a pulpit, but one that towers over the whole of vast Russia and influences all its parts?..."

It was from this pulpit that for fifteen years the voice of Belinsky was heard, inspiring and rousing the people for a self-sacrificing struggle against serfdom and tsarism. Belinsky's influence was enormous in St. Petersburg, where Chernyshevsky went to take up his studies. Shortly after-