

Michael R. Katz:  
*Is to Blame?*  
*from Underground*

# WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

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Nikolai Chernyshevsky

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## I N T R O D U C T I O N

### Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?* and the Russian Intelligentsia

Michael R. Katz and William G. Wagner

If one were to ask for the title of the nineteenth-century Russian novel that has had the greatest influence on Russian society, it is likely that a non-Russian would choose among the books of the mighty triumvirate—Turgenev, Tolstoy, or Dostoyevsky. *Fathers and Sons?* *War and Peace?* *Crime and Punishment?* These would certainly be among the suggested answers; but . . . the novel that can claim this honor with most justice is N. G. Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?*, a book few Western readers have ever heard of and fewer still have read. Yet no work in modern literature, with the possible exception of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, can compete with *What Is to Be Done?* in its effect on human lives and its power to make history. For Chernyshevsky's novel, far more than Marx's *Capital*, supplied the emotional dynamic that eventually went to make the Russian Revolution.<sup>1</sup>

From the moment of its first appearance in 1863, *What Is to Be Done?* provoked bitter controversy. Its author, Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky (1828–1889), had already achieved considerable influence and notoriety as one of Russia's earliest advocates of materialist philosophy, socialist political economy, and women's liberation. The novel's extraordinary impact, however, derived chiefly from the solutions it proposed for Russia's social ills and for the problems that agitated the intelligentsia from the mid-nineteenth century onward. Condemning the patriarchal and authoritarian nature of family, social, and political relations as the principal source of Russia's social inequality, oppressiveness, and economic backwardness, Chernyshevsky rejected moderate reform as an ineffectual and morally bankrupt means of overcoming these problems. In the more radical program he offered, intellectuals would play an active role in social development

1. J. Frank, "N. G. Chernyshevsky: A Russian Utopia," *Southern Review*, 3 (1967), 68.

and moral regeneration. Blending traditional Russian values and institutions with ideas derived from Western European social and political critics, he argued forcefully that individual self-realization, sexual liberation, and an economy that combined prosperity with social justice could be achieved only through the reorganization of the family, society, and means of production in accordance with cooperative principles. Armed with scientific education, "new people"—socially aware and morally strong individuals—would lead this process of reorganization, particularly by enlightening others and providing models for emulation.

### State, Society, and the Intelligentsia

This call to action appealed particularly to the younger generation of the intelligentsia, a small but articulate group of critics of the existing regime who strongly influenced both late imperial Russian and early Soviet history. Attempts to define the intelligentsia have varied widely; some have emphasized the sociological process of education, others the formulation of ideological beliefs antipathetic to autocracy, and still others the psychological experience of alienation as the critical element in the formation of this group.<sup>2</sup> While none of these approaches by itself can explain such a complex phenomenon, each illuminates an important aspect of the intelligentsia. For these educated—often highly educated—individuals who believed in the transformative power of knowledge and ideas saw themselves, and were perceived by their opponents, as a distinct social group dedicated to fundamental changes in both the tsarist political system and the structure of Russian society.

This sense of mission as well as of alienation from the state and the rest of society arose from several important social and cultural changes that occurred in Russia from the early nineteenth century. Chief among them was the growth of an educated elite, which by 1860 still numbered only about 20,000 in a total population of over 60 million.<sup>3</sup> To meet the need for technically more proficient and more

2. See, for example, V. R. Leikina-Svirskaya, *Intelligentsiya v Rossii vo vtoroi polovine XIX veka* (Moscow, 1971), esp. chap. 1; N. Riasanovsky, "Notes on the Emergence and Nature of the Russian Intelligentsia," in *Art and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Russia*, ed. T. Stavrou (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), pp. 3–25; M. Malia, "What Is the Intelligentsia?" in *The Russian Intelligentsia*, ed. R. Pipes (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), pp. 1–18; P. Pomper, *The Russian Revolutionary Intelligentsia* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: AHM, 1970); and M. Raeff, *The Origins of the Russian Intelligentsia: The Eighteenth-Century Nobility* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966).

3. Leikina-Svirskaya, *Intelligentsiya*, p. 70.

social theory, Chernyshevsky quickly con-  
 injustices and lack of development could  
 revolutionary means, especially reforms un-  
 . In his view, the relationship of mutual  
 tocracy and privileged social groups pre-  
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 yshevsky believed, moreover, that if this  
 would need to overturn the patriarchal  
 in the family as well as between social  
 e and society. Thus he became an ardent  
 as a means to pursue social revolution  
 to raise the "woman's question" in mid-  
 But Chernyshevsky condemned not only  
 ment's proposals. He also harshly criti-  
 tsia who supported these proposals and  
 y as well as their intelligence. Moderates  
 y's radicalism not only was impractical  
 n the government away from the more  
 m and to unleash the destructive pas-  
 ses. The break between moderates and  
 sia was complete.

cial action over state reform, however,  
 main within the boundaries set by state  
 personal involvement in revolutionary  
 ernment blamed the upsurge of revolu-  
 the early 1860s on the subversive influ-  
 radical editor. Therefore when Cherny-  
 moderate the journal's political line, the  
 t protests at St. Petersburg University  
 in the northern capital in early 1862 by  
 nd arresting Chernyshevsky on largely  
 g month. While imprisoned and await-  
 66. Chernyshevsky produced his last  
 work, the novel *What Is to Be Done?* In  
 subversion, largely on the basis of false  
 ten years at hard labor (later reduced  
 permanent exile.

t eighteen years in prison or in exile in  
 mily, friends, or sources of intellectual

eteenth-century Russia, see Engel, *Mothers and*  
*ation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism,*  
 Princeton University Press, 1978); G. A. Tishkin,  
 v. (Leningrad, 1984).

stimulation. Isolation, poverty, frustrated hopes, and anxiety over his  
 family's welfare broke his spirit as well as his health. Although he  
 continued to write, most of what he produced lacked the sharpness  
 and focus of his earlier works. Only the autobiographical novel *Pro-*  
*logue*, published in London in 1877, had much literary merit. Olga  
 Sokratovna visited him once. But the journey proved so exhausting for  
 her that Chernyshevsky forbade her to repeat it and even urged her to  
 divorce him in order to find a husband who could offer her more  
 security.<sup>22</sup> In 1883, having subdued the revolutionary movement of the  
 1870s, the government allowed Chernyshevsky to move to the more  
 populous and less remote port of Astrakhan, on the Caspian Sea,  
 where he lived a relatively lonely existence with his wife for the next  
 six years. He was permitted to return to Saratov only in June 1889, four  
 months before his death. While the government's harsh treatment of  
 Chernyshevsky ended his active career, it also transformed him into a  
 martyr and thereby undoubtedly enhanced the appeal of *What Is to Be*  
*Done?* It is perhaps fitting that a man who valued the intellect so  
 highly and tended to treat people as personifications of ideas became  
 himself the mythicized symbol of Russian radicalism.

### The Ideology of a Revolutionary Utopian

Chernyshevsky's chief intellectual accomplishment lay in synthesizing  
 the ideas of contemporary Western European social critics, political  
 economists, and philosophers into an ideology of radicalism that ap-  
 pealed to angry young *intelligenty* caught in the backward conditions  
 of mid-nineteenth-century Russia.<sup>23</sup> The appeal of his ideas derived  
 both from their successful melding of *au courant* European theories  
 with Russian cultural, especially Orthodox religious, values and from  
 the crucial role that they assigned to déclassé intellectuals in the effort  
 to overcome Russia's problems. Though he condemned both the  
 European capitalist present and the patriarchal tsarist past, Cher-

22. Prerevolutionary Russian law treated marriage as a religious institution and  
 therefore assigned jurisdiction over cases of divorce to appropriate ecclesiastical bodies.  
 Although severely restricting divorce, the Orthodox church did allow it in the event that  
 a spouse was exiled to Siberia for conviction of a serious criminal offense. See also text n.  
 66. On Russian divorce law and the controversies surrounding it from the mid-nine-  
 teenth to the early twentieth century, see W. G. Wagner, "The Trojan Mare: Women's  
 Rights and Civil Rights in Prerevolutionary Russia," in *Civil Rights in Prerevolutionary*  
*Russia*, ed. L. Edmondson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

23. Works in English on Chernyshevsky's ideas are listed in the Bibliography. For a  
 sampling of Soviet scholarship on various aspects of Chernyshevsky's thought, see the  
 recent collection of essays edited by M. T. Iovchuk, *N. G. Chernyshevsky i sovremennost'*  
 (Moscow, 1980).

nyshevsky combined secular ideas with religious values, Western European democratic individualism with Russian collectivism and paternalism in a way that promised intellectuals self-fulfillment and social prominence while still binding them closely to the community. Materialist philosophy, utilitarian ethics, science, and technology became the means through which an educated elite would transform traditional social institutions into a prosperous agrarian utopia where both the material welfare of the masses and the creative needs of intellectuals would be satisfied. Chernyshevsky thus offered an ideological vision that promised to resolve the tensions produced by educational reform, Western European competition and cultural intrusion, and the advent of secularization and impact of science in a still predominantly agrarian Christian community.

Philosophical materialism provided the foundation for both Chernyshevsky's critique of the tsarist sociopolitical order and his optimistic belief in the possibility of transforming that order through action informed by scientific knowledge.<sup>24</sup> Influenced strongly by the German materialists Ludwig Büchner and especially Ludwig Feuerbach,<sup>25</sup> Chernyshevsky claimed that body, mind, and spirit represented merely different aspects of a single, unitary human organism that was an integral part of nature. Action, thought, and emotion thus were nothing more than sensual responses to external stimuli and therefore were governed by natural laws. Chernyshevsky argued that these laws could be discovered by rigorous application to human society of the methodology and concepts developed in the natural sciences by such pioneers as the French physiologist Claude Bernard.<sup>26</sup> Human beings would then be able to reshape their social as well as natural environment in accordance with their needs. Religious belief and philosophical idealism impeded progress toward this end, Chernyshevsky asserted, by projecting a false image of human nature which obscured knowledge of reality. Social, political, and religious institutions likewise tended to preserve distorted images of reality in order to protect the power and privileges of the social groups that benefited from these institutions. For Chernyshevsky, then, human progress required both the constant advance of scientific understanding and the elimination of those institutions that perpetuated ignorance.

24. Chernyshevsky's fullest statement of this position may be found in "The Anthropological Principle in History," in N. G. Chernyshevsky, *Selected Philosophical Essays* (Moscow, 1953), pp. 49-135.

25. In his book *Kraft und Stoff* (Force and matter) (1855), the German physician and philosopher Ludwig Büchner provided a materialist interpretation of the universe which rejected God and explained both mind and thought as physical states of the brain produced by matter in motion. On Feuerbach, see text n. 41.

26. On Bernard, see text n. 119.

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Chernyshevsky's theory of aesthetics, which so enraged his moder- ate opponents, followed logically from his materialist epistemology.<sup>27</sup> For him, art represented a medium for revealing, vicariously experi- encing, and thereby better understanding reality. Reality itself could not be transcended, only comprehended. Idealist notions of pure art or beauty therefore were not simply false but dangerous, because they obscured reality and subordinated it to an unrealizable ideal. Cher- nyshevsky concluded that art should therefore be judged on the basis of its fidelity to reality and its ability to expand human knowledge. Hence his theory of aesthetics essentially endeavored to transform art into an instrument of education. Taking this principle a step further in *What Is to Be Done?*, Chernyshevsky sought not only to explain reality but also to change it by providing radical youth with guidelines for social behavior and political action. By thus emphasizing in his fiction- al as well as his critical writing the need to understand and affect the present, Chernyshevsky contributed significantly to the development of aesthetic realism in mid-nineteenth-century Russia despite the ex- tremeness of his views.

In addition to materialism, Chernyshevsky also drew heavily on Brit- ish utilitarianism to explain human behavior and to refute idealist conceptions of morality.<sup>28</sup> The resulting theory of rational egoism en- abled him to reconcile the individual's need for personal self-fulfill- ment with the collective interests of the community. Put simply, Cher- nyshevsky argued that all human behavior was motivated by the desire to maximize personal pleasure and to avoid pain. Since human motivation thus was both constant and universal, differences in the behavior of people could be explained only by the different ways in which their socioeconomic environment led them to act in pursuit of their self-interest. Crime and courage, avarice and charity, all ema- nated from the same egoistical impulse. Chernyshevsky concluded that religious and philosophical idealist concepts of free will and mor- ality therefore could neither explain nor alter human action. "Good" and "evil" became relative terms, their use based on whether people perceived the actions of others as beneficial or harmful to them; the conflict between good and evil simply reflected the clash of interests between competing individuals or social groups. We should resolve such conflicts by maximizing the pleasure of the largest number of people, asserted Chernyshevsky, since that would bring the greatest benefit to society. Building on this idea, he added that enlightened individuals recognized that the maximization of society's interests

27. Chernyshevsky gives his fullest statement of this theory in "The Aesthetic Rela- tions of Art to Reality," in *Selected Philosophical Essays*, pp. 281-422.

28. See especially his essay "Anthropological Principle."

also best served their personal interests because their welfare depended directly on society's general level of prosperity. Self-interest, he contended, therefore led such "rational egoists" to work toward the creation of socioeconomic and political institutions that ensured that personally pleasurable and socially desirable action coincided for each individual. As Christian charity had provided the way to personal salvation for his father, service to the community became the way to personal self-fulfillment for the secularized son.

Chernyshevsky based his defense of cooperative socialism as well as his critique of capitalist individualism and tsarist patriarchy on this theory of rational egoism. Drawing heavily on the work of French utopian socialists and British political economists,<sup>29</sup> he argued that a political economy based on cooperative labor and collective ownership could satisfy the needs of the individual and society more effectively than either capitalism or the tsarist order because it would channel the pursuit of self-interest toward improving the welfare of the group as well as of the self. Economic output expanded more rapidly as a result, Chernyshevsky contended, because individuals worked more efficiently as a group than they did separately and because they worked more productively when they retained the fruits of their labor. Indeed, believing that the value of a good derived from the amount of labor embodied in it, Chernyshevsky idealized manual labor and asserted that it provided the chief source of personal pleasure. He therefore denounced both capitalism and the patriarchal serf economy as exploitive as well as inefficient because they promoted a competitive pursuit of self-interest that deprived especially workers and peasants of the product, and thus the value, of their labor. Economic productivity consequently suffered because laborers expended less effort in their work while the idle rich had to invent unproductive pastimes in order to satisfy their need for sensual stimulation. Both the capitalist and the tsarist patriarchal systems thus depressed a society's overall welfare by preventing the majority of its members from achieving their full productive potential. This was particularly the case in regard to women, who were prevented under both systems from pursuing socially productive and personally fulfilling occupations even when their intelligence surpassed that of men.

In Chernyshevsky's view, then, the source of Russia's economic backwardness and social oppressiveness lay in its patriarchal socioeconomic and political structures. Socialist transformation of these structures promised growth and prosperity as well as personal libera-

29. See n. 14 above, text nn. 148 and 187, and Lichtheim, *Short History of Socialism*. For Chernyshevsky's writings on social, political, and economic questions, see PSS, vols. 4-9.

tion. Following the example of his father and Mikhail Bakunin, Chernyshevsky argued that the peasant commune could undertake this transformation and overcome the evils of capitalism. He argued that it could overcome the evils of capitalism through the application of technology and science. He argued that the peasant commune was the only institution that could overcome the evils of capitalism. He argued that the peasant commune was the only institution that could overcome the evils of capitalism. He argued that the peasant commune was the only institution that could overcome the evils of capitalism.

The growing influence of socialism in Europe during the nineteenth century was a result of the economic and social changes that were taking place in the industrialized nations.

30. On Herzen, see the discussion of his aristocratic family, Mikhail Bakunin, and his role in the Russian Revolution in nineteenth-century France and Saxony in *The Russian Revolution*, ed. by H. C. G. Knight, 1861 to London, which is a study of the movement. Perhaps his most important work is *My Past and My Country*, see A. Kelly, *Chernyshevsky and Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).

31. On this argument, see *The Russian Road: Marx and the Russian Revolution*, ed. by H. C. G. Knight, 1983; A. Gerschenkron, *The Nineteenth Century Russian Revolution: Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963).

32. See nn. 14 and 187 above, and the values that Chernyshevsky argued for.

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tion. Following the ideas of his fellow social critics Alexander Herzen  
 and Mikhail Bakunin,<sup>30</sup> Chernyshevsky believed that the existence of  
 the peasant commune provided Russia with a unique opportunity to  
 undertake this transformation directly, without first having to experi-  
 ence the evils of capitalism.<sup>31</sup> While not idealizing the commune, he  
 argued that it could be transformed through advanced European tech-  
 nology and science, and through the ideas of such thinkers as Fourier,  
 Considérant, and Robert Owen,<sup>32</sup> into a highly productive cooperative  
 agricultural community. Initially hoping that the state might direct  
 this process, Chernyshevsky concluded from the course of emancipa-  
 tion that the tsarist regime was imbued too deeply with patriarchal  
 values and bound too closely to the landed nobility to promote such  
 change. Referring also to the abandonment by French liberals of their  
 ideals when faced with the demands of the masses in 1848–1852,  
 Chernyshevsky began to assert that political structures in general  
 emerged historically as the means by which dominant social groups  
 preserved their power and privileges. Since these groups would never  
 voluntarily surrender their power, significant social or political change  
 could not be achieved through gradual reform, whether promoted by  
 the state or by liberals. Hence only a social revolution that destroyed  
 patriarchal relations within the family and society and thereby under-  
 mined the autocratic political system could clear the way for socialist  
 transformation and economic growth. Considering moderates to have  
 been too thoroughly seduced by the comforts of the old regime to risk  
 real change, Chernyshevsky declared that only the younger, radical  
 members of the intelligentsia could lead this revolution and guide the  
 subsequent transformation of society.

The growing influence of natural science and scientific methodol-  
 ogy among European intellectuals generally during the latter half of  
 the nineteenth century gave Chernyshevsky's ideas an important ad-

30. On Herzen, see pp. 25–26 below and n. 9 above. Descended from a wealthy  
 aristocratic family, Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876) became a leading exponent of anarch-  
 ism in nineteenth-century Europe and participated in revolutionary movements in  
 France and Saxony in 1848–1849. Exiled to Siberia for his political activities, he escaped  
 in 1861 to London, where his quarrel with Marx helped split the international socialist  
 movement. Perhaps his most famous work is his treatise *God and the State* (1882). On  
 Bakunin, see A. Kelly, *Mikhail Bakunin: A Study in the Psychology and Politics of Utopia-  
 nism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); J. Joll, *The Anarchists*, 2d ed. (Cambridge:  
 Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 67–96.

31. On this argument and Chernyshevsky's views on it, see T. Shanin, *Late Marx and  
 the Russian Road: Marx and "The Peripheries of Capitalism"* (New York: Monthly Review  
 Press, 1983); A. Gerschenkron, "Economic Development in Russian Intellectual History of  
 the Nineteenth Century," in *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective: A Book of  
 Essays* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1966), pp. 169–77.

32. See nn. 14 and 29 above. These thinkers may also have reinforced the Christian  
 values that Chernyshevsky received originally from his father.



vantage in the ideological conflict that erupted within Russia's educated elite at this time. The apparent objectivity of materialism and utilitarianism enabled him to deny the legitimacy of both idealist ethics and the values underlying existing political, social, and religious institutions while simultaneously providing legitimacy to his own ideals in the guise of scientific fact. Yet despite his sincere profession of materialism and his pretensions to scientific objectivity, Chernyshevsky remained essentially an idealist. Following the earlier radical Russian critic Vissarion Belinsky,<sup>33</sup> for example, he argued that an accurate depiction of social reality entailed a critique of its injustices and an indication of how they could be overcome. Such a critique implied an ideal of justice against which to measure reality. Nor did Chernyshevsky simply explain or describe actions and relationships in terms of socioeconomic utility; he also judged them in terms of moral categories. Failure to work toward the goals that he defined was not merely illogical or inexpedient but also immoral. His utopian vision projected a harmonious community where egalitarian and just social relations remained unaffected by constant technological change. Indeed, this vision appealed to educated young Russians precisely because it combined familiar Orthodox Christian ideals with new utopian socialist and democratic models and invested the amalgam with scientific certainty, thereby providing youthful *intelligenty* with firm moral guidelines during a period of social and ideological dislocation. The very fact that Chernyshevsky concentrated his efforts so single-mindedly on educating this intellectual elite testifies to his belief that history was moved at least as much by ideas as by material forces. Armed with the proper ideas, these "new people" could reshape rather than simply react to the Russian environment, in the process creating a society that was more just as well as more productive.

This combination of moral and scientific certainty helps explain the stridency, intolerance, and self-righteousness with which Chernyshevsky promoted his ideas. It also explains the blend of democratic collectivism and elitist paternalism that characterized these ideas. For while extolling service to the community as the path to personal self-fulfillment, Chernyshevsky portrayed an elite that served society largely by shaping it in accordance with the elite's own view of social justice. As a result, much like the Christian precepts from which he drew sustenance, Chernyshevsky's ideas contained the potential for

33. A commoner like Chernyshevsky, Vissarion Belinsky (1811–1848) was an outspoken advocate of radical views as well as Russia's most prominent literary critic during the late 1830s and 1840s. Denouncing the idea of "art for art's sake," he argued that literature should comment critically on social and political reality, but without sacrificing its aesthetic qualities. For a perceptive essay on Belinsky, see Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, pp. 150–85.

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authoritarianism as well as for liberation. The tension between egoism  
 and altruism, evident in his life and explored in his fictional charac-  
 ters, thus remained unresolved.

But if Chernyshevsky was a paternalistic elitist, he was no more so  
 than either apologists of the tsarist regime or his moderate opponents  
 within the intelligentsia. Indeed, his arguments effectively exposed the  
 dilemma confronting Russian moderates, whose ideals also were in-  
 compatible with autocracy and alien to the majority of the Russian  
 people. Moderates no less than radicals had to destroy the old regime  
 and impose their values on the rest of society in order to realize their  
 goals. Facing the Scylla of political disorder and the Charybdis of  
 social upheaval, they tended to opt for order at the expense of social  
 change.<sup>34</sup> In pursuing his ideals, Chernyshevsky at least focused di-  
 rectly on the poverty, hunger, and oppression that afflicted the major-  
 ity of the population. By doing so from a materialist and scientific  
 perspective, he helped provoke a more sophisticated debate over Rus-  
 sia's economic backwardness by calling attention to the sociological  
 and technological sources of this problem. Perhaps most impressive,  
 however, Chernyshevsky persuaded the younger generation of the in-  
 telligentsia of the possibility as well as the nobility of acting to over-  
 come Russia's social and economic problems. He thereby provided  
 déclassé intellectuals with a social role that gave them considerable  
 self-esteem regardless of the success or failure of their actions. The  
 bible for these radical intellectuals became the novel *What Is to Be  
 Done?*

#### The Genesis of a Utopian Novel: The Writing of *What Is to Be Done?*

*What Is to Be Done?* represents the best-known and most com-  
 prehensive statement of Chernyshevsky's ideas. Through it he exerted  
 extraordinary influence on generations of Russian radicals. The ac-  
 tions of these radicals and the reactions of their opponents cannot be  
 fully understood without reference to the source that inspired or en-  
 raged them. Rakhmetov, the totally rational revolutionary ascetic and  
 superhero, makes both Lenin and Dostoevsky more comprehensible;  
 Vera Pavlovna, the emancipated woman who tears asunder the con-  
 ventional family and the institution of marriage, helps explain both

34. D. Offord, *Portraits of Early Russian Liberals: A Study of the Thought of T. N. Granovsky, V. P. Botkin, P. V. Annenkov, A. V. Druzhinin, and K. D. Kavelin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); W. Rosenberg, *Liberals in the Russian Revolution: The Constitutional Democratic Party, 1917–1921* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

Sofya Perovskaya and Konstantin Pobedonostsev.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Chernyshevsky both followed and contributed to a rich Russian literary tradition by presenting the major statement of his ideas in the form of a novel. Written as a response to Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, *What Is to Be Done?* in turn provoked Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. The book thus represents a major work of Russian literature as well as one of the key documents for understanding nineteenth-century Russian social and political thought, revolutionary activity, and social conflict.

Chernyshevsky produced *What Is to Be Done?* while incarcerated in the Peter-Paul Fortress, where he sat awaiting trial as his case was laboriously investigated. Prevented from writing any further essays or articles, he turned to fiction as a medium for expressing his ideas. The novel was not meant as a diversion or as a substitute for more important work. Chernyshevsky explained subsequently to the official Commission of Inquiry, "For a long time I have planned . . . to apply myself to literature. But I am convinced that people of my character must do this only in their later years. . . . A novel is destined for the great mass of the public. It is a writer's most serious undertaking, and so it belongs to old age. *The frivolity of the form must be compensated for by the solidity of the thought.*"<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the protestations of the narrator in the novel notwithstanding, Chernyshevsky meant his work to stand in the great tradition of Russian literature represented by Gogol and Turgenev.

In late 1862 Chernyshevsky asked the prison commandant for permission to begin work on a novel. His request granted, he set to work and produced the entire novel within four months, between December 14, 1862, and April 4, 1863. The first part of the manuscript was then submitted to the prison censor, who, whether carelessly or for devious purposes, passed it and forwarded the manuscript to the censor of the journal *Sovremennik*. Passed again, the novel was sent to

35. Daughter of a nobleman who had been governor of St. Petersburg, Sofya Perovskaya (1853–1881) became a revolutionary activist in the 1870s and helped to orchestrate the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, for which she was executed the same year. An outstanding scholar of civil law as well as a leading exponent of ultraconservative views in late-nineteenth-century Russia, Konstantin Pobedonostsev (1827–1907) exerted a strong influence on state policy as an adviser to Alexander III (r. 1881–1894) and Nicholas II (r. 1894–1917) and as oberprocurator of the Holy Synod (i.e., the chief lay administrator of the Orthodox church). On Perovskaya, see Engel, *Mothers and Daughters*, and D. Footman, *Red Prelude: A Biography of Zhelyabov* (London: Cresset Press, 1944); on Pobedonostsev, see R. Byrnes, *Pobedonostsev: His Life and Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968).

36. Quoted in F. Venturi, *Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1966), p. 178; emphasis added.

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Pobedonostsev.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Cher-tributed to a rich Russian literary statement of his ideas in the form of Dostoevsky's *Fathers and Sons*, *What Is to Be Done?*, and *Notes from Underground*. This work of Russian literature as well as understanding nineteenth-century Russian revolutionary activity, and social con-

*What Is to Be Done?* while incarcerated in prison awaiting trial as his case was pending. He was forbidden from writing any further essays or articles as a medium for expressing his ideas. The novel was written as a substitute for more important work and subsequently to the official Commission of the Academy of Sciences. "I have planned . . . to apply myself to writing a novel that people of my character must do. The novel is destined for the great mass of the people, a serious undertaking, and so it bears the form of a novel. It must be compensated for by the interest of the reader, the protestations of the narrator, and the work of Chernyshevsky meant his work to stand as a masterpiece of literature represented by Gogol and

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ington: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movement, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1966), p. 178.

the journal's editor, Nekrasov, who promptly lost it in a cab. He managed to recover the manuscript only after advertising in the official gazette of the St. Petersburg police. With what is perhaps the greatest irony of Russian letters, the novel that the police helped to retrieve turned out to be the most subversive and revolutionary work of nineteenth-century Russian literature. Its publication has aptly been called "the most spectacular example of bureaucratic bungling in the cultural realm during the reign of Alexander II."<sup>37</sup>

*What Is to Be Done?* appeared in numbers 3, 4, and 5 of *Sovremennik* for 1863, and was published subsequently as a separate volume. A rough draft, lacking sections 19–23 of Chapter 5 and all of Chapter 6, was discovered much later in the archive of the Peter-Paul Fortress and published in 1929. An authoritative version of the novel edited by T. I. Ornatkaya and S. A. Reiser appeared in the Academy of Sciences Literary Monument Series in 1975. Their text is basically a reprint of the original journal version, which was carefully collated with manuscripts housed in the Central Government Archive of Literature and Art in Moscow. We have used this edition in preparing the present translation.

Although a number of Western European literary texts exerted a significant influence on Chernyshevsky's novel, the works of three authors, all mentioned specifically in the text of the novel, merit special attention. First among these writers is the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose novel *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) served as one of Chernyshevsky's most important sources.<sup>38</sup> Rousseau's *Julie d'Étange* provided a model for Chernyshevsky's *Julie Letellier*, the semiliberated French courtesan who acts as a foil for his heroine, Vera Pavlovna. And like Rousseau's *Saint-Preux*, Chernyshevsky's *Lopukhov* is a man of strong character and absolute rationality. Most important, Chernyshevsky's *Vera Pavlovna* is meant to be perceived as a new, "improved" version of Rousseau's *Julie*. Through her character Chernyshevsky sought to show how the ideal of women's equality articulated by Rousseau could be realized in practice. This lineage is stated explicitly in *Vera Pavlovna's* fourth dream, where Chernyshevsky describes Rousseau as the figure who inaugurated the "modern phase" of feminism by providing the first model of an intelligent and independent heroine.

The novels of the French author George Sand, particularly *Jacques*

37. J. Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation, 1860–1865* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 285.

38. See J. Scanlan, "Chernyshevsky and Rousseau," in *Western Philosophical Systems in Russian Literature: A Collection of Critical Studies*, ed. A. Mlikotin (Los Angeles: University of Southern California Press, 1979), pp. 103–20, and text n. 252.

(1834, translated 1844), also strongly influenced the feminist theme as well as the plot of *What Is to Be Done*.<sup>39</sup> Throughout her works Sand emphasizes the primacy of love and the absolute right of a woman to achieve romantic fulfillment—if not with her legal husband, then with her heart's desire. Thus at the end of *Jacques*, Sand's hero chooses to sacrifice his love for Fernande in order to set her free to love Octave. He makes his own suicide appear to be an accident and "quits the scene" without remorse. It is particularly notable for our purposes that the hero's sister, Sylvia, tries to dissuade Jacques from his chosen course by arguing that there really should be something else to life besides love. She even suggests to the hero that he start all over again, perhaps in the New World.

While Sand's heroine may achieve personal fulfillment, however, she contributes little to society. So just as Chernyshevsky's Vera Pavlovna is a new version of Rousseau's Julie, she also represents an advance over Sand's Fernande. Living not for love alone, Vera Pavlovna pursues her own course of spiritual and intellectual development. She has her own work (organizing sewing cooperatives), which she finally abandons only to pursue an even nobler calling, the study of medicine—as many "new men" do—in order to achieve complete independence and equality. In Chernyshevsky's view, then, the emancipation of women requires both freedom in love and involvement in socially useful labor, especially of the type favored by male intellectuals. Indeed, Chernyshevsky considered love and labor to be complementary, with the sensual stimulation of the former yielding greater creativity and productivity in the latter.

By the same token, Chernyshevsky's Lopukhov represents an advance over Sand's hero. Seeking to extricate himself more rationally than Jacques from his own love triangle, Lopukhov stages a *fictional* suicide. Then heeding Sylvia's advice to Jacques, as it were, he chooses to start life afresh in the New World. He later returns to Russia, finds a suitable mate, and ultimately settles down to live in complete harmony with her alongside Vera Pavlovna and Kirsanov.

Finally, Chernyshevsky was also influenced by the English novelist Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854), which he had reviewed in *Sovremennik*.<sup>40</sup> While appreciating Dickens' hardheaded realism and biting social criticism, however, Chernyshevsky took issue with what he described as the English author's "deviations" from that admirable path: his fondness for plots centering on love and sentiment and his reliance on conventional morality and happy endings. Similarities in

39. See A. P. Skaftymov, "Chernyshevsky i Zhorzh Sand," in *Stat'i o russkoi literature* (Saratov, 1958), pp. 161–83; text n. 30; and *PSS*, 3:340–45.

40. *PSS*, 16:147–49. See also text n. 31.

so strongly influenced the feminist theme as *What Is to Be Done?*<sup>39</sup> Throughout her works Sand is concerned with the absolute right of a woman to love and the absolute right of a woman to work—if not with her legal husband, then with her lover. At the end of *Jacques*, Sand's hero chooses to die in order to set her free to love Octave. He appears to be an accident and "quits the scene" particularly notable for our purposes that the hero is dissuaded from his chosen course. There should be something else to life besides the hero that he start all over again, perhaps

to achieve personal fulfillment, however, she is not. So just as Chernyshevsky's Vera Pavlovna is not Julie, she also represents an advance over her for love alone, Vera Pavlovna pursues her intellectual development. She has her own cooperatives), which she finally abandons for her calling, the study of medicine—as many women to achieve complete independence and freedom of view, then, the emancipation of women is not an end and involvement in socially useful labor, but a means, as suggested by male intellectuals. Indeed, Chernyshevsky's labor to be complementary, with the former yielding greater creativity and pro-

Chernyshevsky's Lopukhov represents an advance in trying to extricate himself more rationally from the love triangle, Lopukhov stages a *fictitious* piece of advice to Jacques, as it were, he chooses to go to the World. He later returns to Russia, finds a woman and settles down to live in complete harmony with Vera Pavlovna and Kirsanov.

Chernyshevsky was also influenced by the English novelist George Eliot (1854), which he had reviewed in *Sovremennik*. Dickens' hardheaded realism and biting sarcasm Chernyshevsky took issue with what he deemed "deviations" from that admirable path: the emphasis on love and sentiment and his reliance on happy endings. Similarities in

Chernyshevsky i Zhorzh Sand," in *Stat'i o russkoi literature* (Leningrad: PSS, 3:340-45).

characters and themes abound between *Hard Times* and *What Is to Be Done?* Bounderby's "rugged individualism" has been transformed into the "new men's" "rational egoism"; Gradgrind's "heartless utilitarianism" has been revised, particularly to accommodate emotions; Dickens' industrial institutions (coal mine, factory, trade union) find their counterpart in Vera Pavlovna's sewing cooperative and commune. Sleary's circus and the values of imagination and recreation it represents have become the picnics and gala balls of Chernyshevsky's emerging utopia. And Dickens' solidly liberal criticism of all the major institutions of mid-nineteenth-century England—economic, political, social, religious, educational, and domestic—has become, in Chernyshevsky's novel, a radical critique of mid-nineteenth-century Russia, with the ultimate goal of revolutionary transformation replacing that of gradual reform.

While Rousseau, Sand, and Dickens proved to be the three most important Western authors whose novels influenced Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?*, within the Russian literary tradition it was Herzen's *Who Is to Blame?* (1841-1846) and Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1862) that exerted the greatest impact.<sup>41</sup> Like Chernyshevsky subsequently, Herzen began where Sand's *Jacques* left off. In his novel he too created a romantic triangle that develops into a short-lived ménage à trois until the conflict is resolved.<sup>42</sup> In Herzen's novel, however, it is the rival, not the husband, who departs and resigns himself to a life of aimless wandering. Yet Beltov's decision brings no relief to the principal players: Lyubov's health declines while her husband sinks deeper into drink. The tragic unhappiness resulting for all those involved offered little hope for either the emancipation of women or the personal fulfillment of critical intellectuals in mid-nineteenth-century Russia.

Herzen's novel thus represents more than a love story. *Who Is to Blame?* is a novel of ideas and issues given artistic form through vivid characterization. In particular, Herzen was concerned with the same basic questions that agitated Chernyshevsky: defining the social role of intellectuals and determining their ability to affect Russia's future. Yet Herzen offered more pessimistic answers than his successor. His chief male character, the aristocratic Vladimir Beltov, is an "ideological hero," a man of noble soul but weak character, who fails to find a way to translate his lofty ideals into effective action and thereby relieve Russia's oppressiveness. The reader is left to wonder whether the fault

41. One might also want to consider Druzhinin's *Polin'ka Saks* (1847) and Avdeev's *Podvodnyi kamen'* (1860).

42. See the introduction to A. Herzen, *Who Is to Blame?* trans. M. R. Katz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 15-39.

lies with the man, the constraints of his environment, or the rigidity of his ideals. Beltov's tragedy thus is not merely personal-psychological but also sociopolitical, and Herzen managed to combine these two levels in a compelling work of fiction. But the question posed by Herzen's title—the responsibility for his characters' ineffectuality and for Russia's oppressiveness—remained unanswered because the author had no answer. Chernyshevsky, ascribing blame to both the patriarchal tsarist system and Beltov's misplaced idealism, would pose a different, more practical question in the title of his novel. In doing so, he too would present both a romantic triangle and ideological hero(es) in his book.

Between Herzen's *Who Is to Blame?* and Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* stands (both chronologically and ideologically) Turgenev's controversial novel *Fathers and Sons*. In it the author treats as his central problem the relationship between ideology and romantic love, or, more generally, between reason and emotion. The young hero, the *raznochinets*<sup>43</sup> Bazarov, an ideological "nihilist" who exalts reason and denies the significance of emotion or poetry, encounters love and passion in the form of Odintsova (and to a lesser extent Fenechka), and consequently discovers the "abyss of romanticism" within himself. The discovery undermines both his ideology and his sense of self. Forced to confront his own mortality, he "quits the scene" by what can be interpreted as a senseless, self-destructive act. Reason without idealism, Turgenev seems to say, can provide neither a guide to action for the intelligentsia nor a solution to Russia's ills.

While Turgenev's hero articulates a much more explicit ideology than Herzen's Beltov, Bazarov's nihilism still remains destructive at best. He aims only "to clear the ground" and has absolutely no positive program in mind. One can also argue that the objects of Bazarov's romantic love are themselves unworthy of him: on the one hand, a spoiled and cautious aristocrat; on the other, a sweet and innocent peasant maiden. In terms of neither his ideology nor his love could Bazarov be perceived as a flattering portrait of the "new man." In contrast, the hero's weak-willed liberal friend, the nobleman Arkady Kirsanov, manages to achieve a measure of happiness as well as modest economic progress by combining his reason with idealism and an acceptance of such traditional values as love of family, nature, and the land.

Chernyshevsky considered *Fathers and Sons* to be a dastardly cari-

43. A term (lit., "person of diverse ranks") used in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russia to indicate someone, usually an intellectual or professional, who was not of noble birth and who had left his or her original social estate without having been ascribed a new one.

straints of his environment, or the rigidity of thus is not merely personal-psychological and Herzen managed to combine these two of fiction. But the question posed by Her- for his characters' ineffectuality and for remained unanswered because the author Chernyshevsky, ascribing blame to both the patriar- elto's misplaced idealism, would pose a question in the title of his novel. In doing so, a romantic triangle and ideological hero(es)

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*and Fathers and Sons* to be a dastardly cari-

e ranks") used in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century an intellectual or professional, who was not of noble original social estate without having been ascribed a

ature of his close friend and fellow radical critic Nikolai Dobrolyu- bov.<sup>44</sup> In his own novel he sought to refute Turgenev's portrayal of the "new men" (and women) and to present a more "accurate" image that would demonstrate the possibility of reconciling "rational egoism" and romantic love in a single ideology that allowed for effective action. Chernyshevsky consequently borrowed names from Turgenev's work (Kirsanov and Lopukhov),<sup>45</sup> selected his heroes from the same class (the *raznochintsy*), and gave them the same noble academic calling (medicine). But he transformed Bazarov's negative, ill-conceived, and easily abandoned nihilism into "rational egoism," Bazarov's "abyss of romanticism" into mature, "rational" love, and his self-destructive urge into a revolutionary movement. Even Turgenev's caricature of a "liberated woman" (Kukshina) was replaced by the genuinely emancipated Vera Pavlovna. Chernyshevsky's novel must thus be seen as part of an ongoing debate in Russian literature, with each author developing, refuting, recasting, and transforming the characters, plot, and themes of his predecessors' work.

### The Structure of *What Is to Be Done?*

The first Soviet commissar of education, A. V. Lunacharsky, once suggested that the key to the structure of *What Is to Be Done?* lies in its "vulgar people, new people, superior people, and dreams."<sup>46</sup> This remark suggests a hierarchy of characterization; in fact, there are two, one for heroes and the other for heroines, with opportunity for comparison and contrasts both within and between the two groups.

Among males, the three most important "vulgar" characters (all from the nobility) are Misha Storeshnikov, dominated by a desire for Vera Pavlovna's respectability; Jean Solovtsov, passionately in love with Katya Polozova's wealth; and Serge, absolutely devoted to Julie Letellier's will. The first two, both ultimately unsuccessful suitors, demonstrate no possibility whatever of improvement, thereby apparently contradicting Chernyshevsky's own theory of environmental determinism. Serge appears minimally acceptable and, with Julie's prompting, even manages to act nobly on a few occasions.

The main heroes of the novel, Lopukhov and Kirsanov, occupy the

44. On Dobrolyubov, see text n. 11; E. Lampert, *Sons against Fathers: Studies in Russian Radicalism and Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 226-61; Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, pp. 187-203.

45. The name Lopukhov probably is derived from the *lopukh* (burdock) that grows on gentry estates in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*.

46. A. V. Lunacharsky, *Russkaya literatura: Izbrannye stat'i* (Moscow, 1947), p. 164.



## Western Criticism of What is to be Done?

criticism of Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* and reductionist. Typical is the statement made in the introduction to the recent Soviet translation in English:

ian prose in general, and *What Is to Be Done?* in social sentiment aspiring to conscious service in towards a better life on this earth. It is a rare example summing the social and economic thought of its In the fullest sense, it became a weapon in the revolutionary scholar and man of letters. For it was and consecrated to the cause of battle.<sup>62</sup>

ons. Grigory Tamarchenko's monograph *Chernyshevsky the novelist* and his introduction on in the Literary Monument Series represent our understanding of the work, as does S. A. one volume.<sup>63</sup> Otherwise, one falls back on the Alekseev and A. P. Skaftymov, which explore is to Western European literature; T. A. Bogdanenko, including one on characterization.<sup>64</sup> mmentary on the novel, one by N. L. Brodsky the other by M. T. Pinaev (1963), also contain a

erved Chernyshevsky somewhat better, but it o's penetrating study of the author's life and e monograph has been available. Books by (1971), and Pereira (1975) have been referred to es Chernyshevsky as a writer and argues r figure in Russian letters whose novel de- ure. Woehrlin concentrates on the role of ic debate and its impact on Russian youth.

*What Is to Be Done?* trans. L. Beraha (Moscow, 1983), Intro-  
"What Is to Be Done?" ed. T. I. Ornatskaya and S. A. Reiser (Leningrad,

yshevsky v zapadno-evropeiskikh literaturakh," in N. va-Maksimova (Leningrad, 1941), pp. 242-69; Skafty-  
"; T. A. Bogdanovich, *Lyubov' lyudei shestidesyatikh*  
Yu. K. Rudenko, "Obrazy 'novykh lyudei' i vopros o  
o. 3 (1977), pp. 16-32.

v, *Kommentarii k romanu N. G. Chernyshevsky "Chto*  
*lyubov' lyudei shestidesyatikh*, *Kommentarii k romanu N. G. Chernyshevsky "Chto*

Pereira describes Chernyshevsky neither as the thoroughgoing revolutionary that his Soviet admirers assert him to be nor as the gravedigger of liberal humanism his anti-Soviet detractors portray, but rather as the first full-fledged theorist of democratic socialism in Russia.

## English Translations of What is to be Done?

While Western criticism may have served Chernyshevsky somewhat better than its Soviet counterpart, Western translators have done the novel a distinct disservice.<sup>66</sup> Until now only two American translations of the novel have appeared, both in 1886, both woefully inadequate. They are flawed by numerous inaccuracies and infelicities, and their English is now antiquated. The first was published by Benjamin R. Tucker, a famous American anarchist who knew no Russian and probably based his translation on a French version. Tucker's version was "revised and abridged" (i.e., censored and truncated) by Ludmilla Turkevich and published by the Vintage Russian Library in 1961. When this volume went out of print it was reissued by Virago Books in 1983 in a so-called expanded form by Cathy Porter with only a small portion of the omitted material reinstated.

The second American translation was published by Nathan Haskell Dole, an American man of letters, and S. S. Skidelsky. Although Dole knew Russian, his translation also suffers from numerous blunders, literalisms, awkward phrases, and infelicitous expressions. After having been out of print for many years, his version was recently reissued by Ardis Publishers in a facsimile edition with a new introduction by Kathryn Feuer. Although Feuer claims that her volume provides a complete translation of Chernyshevsky's novel, in fact the reprint contains all the omissions of Dole's Victorian version, including a number of erotic passages.

In addition to these American translations, a Soviet edition of *What Is to Be Done?* translated by Laura Beraha was published by Raduga in 1983. Though it is at least complete, one scholar has characterized it accurately as "mutilated by the translator's determined use of outdated and confused British (especially Cockney) and U.S. (Western cowboy) slang."<sup>67</sup>

The publication of this new translation is intended to make the complete text of Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* readily available to English and American readers for the first time. The text is accom-

66. See M. R. Katz, "English Translations of Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?*" *Slavic Review*, 46/1 (1987), 125-31.

67. Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?* Introduction by K. Feuer (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1986), p. xxxv.

panied by a comprehensive commentary designed to make the novel comprehensible to the general reader. A list of principal characters (including accent marks for pronunciation) precedes the text, and a selected bibliography of works in English follows it. It is our hope that the availability of a complete, accurate, and readable version will allow English and American readers to fathom the impact of Chernyshevsky's novel on human lives as well as the source of its power to make history.

Readers will find a rich work of synthesis that creatively fashioned many of the salient ideas then current in Western Europe into a coherent ideology that addressed universal themes as well as the historical problems and conditions of mid-nineteenth century Russia. For in seeking solutions to Russia's ills, Chernyshevsky explored the nature of marriage and the family, human intimacy, and the need for sexual freedom. In evaluating the tsarist social order, he examined the basis of relations between social groups, the role of women, the sources of prostitution, and the relationship between social structure and political power. Turning to economics, he discussed the sources and meaning of backwardness, the process and social costs of development, and alternative forms of organizing production. As a religious thinker, he committed sacrilege by having his characters violate Christian sacraments, rituals, and beliefs and by establishing his own religion of atheism, complete with its own appropriation of those same religious patterns, symbols, images, and motifs.<sup>68</sup> In the realm of psychology Chernyshevsky explored human emotions and motivations, particularly the tension between egoism and altruism and between reason and irrationality. To be sure, his ideas on these issues often seem simplistic and naive, especially to late-twentieth-century eyes gazing back over the destruction as well as accomplishments that human reason, science, and technology have wrought.<sup>69</sup> Like the intelligentsia generally, Chernyshevsky overestimated the power of ideas and human reason to solve complex social problems. His belief in human intellect and in a universal human nature led him to prescribe solutions to problems, whether of peasants or of women, that often reflected his values and needs more than those of the intended beneficiaries. But in exploring so many aspects of human life, Chernyshevsky's novel still challenges its readers to think about them. That, too, is a legacy the moralistic teacher from Saratov would probably not have disavowed.

68. Paperno, *Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism*, p. 206-18.

69. See, for example, Randall, *Chernyshevskii*, p. 159; Woehrlin, *Chernyshevskii*, p. 3; Pereira, *Chernyshevsky*, p. 85.

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