slavophile thought and the politics of cultural nationalism

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and the
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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The first comprehensive idea of a distinctive Russian national identity was articulated by a small group of intellectuals, the so-called Slavophiles, in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.[1] This original Russian nationalism is commonly seen as a conservative criticism of modern society. Its advent is ascribed to the so-called Westernizers and their promotion of Western liberal values. According to the general view, the Slavophiles reacted against the Westernizers' espousal of Western values by promoting Russian customs and institutions and by taking an interest in Russian history, folklore, and the philosophy of the Eastern doctors of the Church. Their explorations of the Russian soul prepared the ground for subsequent ideas of the distinctive Russian nation. Nevertheless, because of their apparent interest in abstract philosophy, both Westernizers and Slavophiles have been accused of being utopian and of not taking the social realities of contemporary Russia into account. Thus, Andrzej Walicki, one of the leading scholars of Russian thought, writes that it was "a strongly utopian variety of conservatism . . . In fact, it was not so much an ideological defence of an existing tradition, as a utopian attempt to rehabilitate and revive a lost tradition." As a consequence of its "transcenden[ce] in relation to existing social realities," we should understand it as a "conservative utopia." Thus, Slavophilism was "introverted" and did not lead to any activity aimed at changing the world.[2]

Scholars have focused on the philosophical meaning and originality of Slavophile thought, rather than on its historical context. As a consequence, the important question with regards to their ideas has been whether they contributed to a distinctive Russian philosophy, and not why their ideas were formulated in the first place. By shifting the focus from the concepts that have generally been regarded as central to their ideology, to the problems the Slavophiles themselves identified and addressed, this

study questions the conventional view of these thinkers as conservative dreamers.[3] It argues instead that Slavophilism was a critical assessment of contemporary Russian society and a project for social change. Slavophilism was formulated as an attempt to solve an identity crisis among Russian intellectuals. Hence, it cannot be treated as an escape from reality. Rather, it should be regarded as a rational confrontation with what contemporaries saw as genuine problems.

This reinterpretation of Slavophile thought is best understood when placed in the context of cultural nationalism, wherein we can make sense of the problems the Slavophiles addressed and the solutions they proposed. Scholars have indeed pointed to links between Slavophilism and cultural nationalism, but this connection has generally rested on a mistaken conception of the cultural idea of the nation, a conception formed by an unjustifiable celebration of the civic or political idea of the nation.

In the early twentieth century, Friedrich Meinecke made a distinction between the political nation, or *Staatsnation*, based on a common political history and a shared constitution, and the cultural nation, *Kulturnation*, based on a shared cultural heritage. The most important distinction between the two is that while membership in the former is voluntary, membership in the cultural nation is not a matter of choice, but of common objective identity. Meinecke maintained that political nationalism derived from the spirit of 1789, i.e. from the idea of the self-determination and sovereignty of the nation. Cultural nationalism, in contrast, strove for national individuality, characteristic of anti-Enlightenment German thought.[4]

Hans Kohn later used this distinction in trying to account for the difference in development between Eastern and Western Europe along with North America. Kohn described the cultural form of Eastern nationalism as an organic, mystical, and often authoritarian nationalism, in contrast to the civic and rational political nationalism of the West. Instead of using Western rationalism and universal standards as its justification, Eastern nationalism looked to the heritage of its own past and extolled the ancient peculiarities of its traditions. Kohn argued that because of the backward state of political and social development, nationalism outside the Western world found its first expression in the cultural field. Here, the nation was the dream and hope of scholars and poets, a venture in education and propaganda rather than in policy-making and government.[5] More recently, Michael Hughes made a similar distinction between what he calls liberal nationalism, inspired by the political ideals of the French Revolution, and

Romantic nationalism. The latter was, in his view, mainly a cultural move-
ment, formed as a reaction against what was perceived as the cold rational-
ism of the Enlightenment.[6]

Recently, scholars have questioned the dichotomy between a cultural
and a political nationalism, but they are mainly interested in criticising the
way this dichotomy justifies political nationalism by cleansing it from cul-
tural elements. These scholars claim that a cultural component exists also
in political nationalism. Bernard Yack argues that political nationalism is
almost always based on ideas of a distinctive cultural identity. The conclu-
sion drawn from this assertion is that "all nationalisms are cultural nation-
alisms of one kind or another."[7] But the fact that all nationalisms are
cultural nationalisms to some degree, does not warrant the rejection of the
attempt to distinguish between the basic features of different kinds of na-
tionalisms. After all, there is a fundamental difference between a national-
ism based on voluntary allegiance to a constitution and that based on
membership in a distinctive people.

Hence, although this recent criticism of the nationalist dichotomy
makes important assertions regarding political nationalism, it fails to ac-
count for the specific role and character of what is generally referred to as
cultural nationalism. In order to make sense of nationalism, both parts of
the original dichotomy need to be reconsidered without denying the dif-
ferences that do exist. Admiration for the political, or civic, idea of the na-
tion has not only neglected the cultural basis of political nationalism, it has
also generated distorted images of other forms of nationalism. The con-
tempt or disregard for cultural nationalism has thereby deprived us of a
valuable tool for understanding nationalist thought.

Just as political nationalism contains cultural elements, so cultural na-
tionalism can be political, albeit in a way different from political national-
ism. This book argues that there is a cultural nationalism with a politics of
its own. This form of nationalism has its own specific agenda and its own
way of making social changes that does not fit into traditional definitions
of politics as having to do with government and the state. In contrast to
other forms of nationalism, cultural nationalism does not strive either for
a convergence between state and nation, thus realizing the nationality-
principle, or for the establishment of political rule based on the principle
of popular sovereignty. Instead, it seeks to achieve social change through
the moral regeneration of the nation.

This distinctive form of nationalism has received little attention from
social scientists because it is seen as nonpolitical in character. Most studies

of nationalism have been concerned with the process of nation-building and, consequently, have focused on political movements that are trying to establish an independent nation-state through political means. Given that cultural nationalism is not concerned with political power and control of the state, scholars have regarded it as a marginal and, at the same time, undesirable phenomenon. It has commonly been looked upon as both politically indifferent and as an antimodern, regressive tendency.[8] Since cultural nationalism originally developed as a Romantic critique of the universalistic claims of the French Enlightenment, it has been subjected to the same set of criticism as Romanticism itself. In fact, the common distinction between political and cultural nationalism has its origin in an equally common distinction between Enlightenment and Romantic thought. Thus, whereas Enlightenment thought is seen as politically informed and progressive, Romantic thought is regarded as politically indifferent and regressive. Like cultural nationalists, Romantics have been accused of retreating from an unattractive reality instead of trying to change it.[9]

In a recent study of early German Romanticism, Frederick Beiser challenges the current view of Romantic thought as politically indifferent, arguing that it can, in fact, be seen as a radical political project. The ideas of the early German Romantics, he asserts, were not "harmless abstractions," but powerful weapons used for political struggle. Furthermore, there is a strong continuity with Enlightenment thought; and some Enlightenment ideals, such as education, progress, and universality, are preserved in Romantic thought.[10] For this reason, the use of Romantic concepts and arguments does not make cultural nationalism apolitical and regressive. Indeed, this was a way of thinking and speaking found among many contemporary liberal nationalists.

John Hutchinson makes a case for giving cultural nationalism more scholarly attention by arguing for its significance in shaping the modern political community.[11] He claims that emerging cultural nationalist movements have preceded the struggle for nationhood everywhere in the modern world. Cultural nationalist movements are "historico-cultural revivals" which emerged in nineteenth-century societies. These movements of regeneration subsequently inspired rising social groups to collective political action.[12] Cultural nationalism is based on a historicist view of cultures as unique organisms, "each with its peculiar laws of growth and decay." While the purpose of political nationalism is to gain political power in order to transform the state and make it congruent with the nation, cultural nationalism wishes to transform society in order to realize the nation.

It strives to regenerate the true character of the nation, which is to be manifested in its culture, that is, in its art, thought, and way of life. By reviving the dormant national spirit, cultural nationalism seeks to unite the different aspects of the nation, or rather, of the national culture; the traditional and the modern, the rural and the urban, reason and faith. To cultural nationalists, the glory of a country comes not from its political power but from the culture of its people and the contribution of its thinkers and artists to humanity.[13]

By reformulating Slavophilism in the light of cultural nationalism this study repudiates the prevalent view of the Slavophiles as conservative and utopian. It also questions the image of the origins of Russian nationalism as isolationistic and antagonistic to the West. This view has its foundation in an essentialist conception of Russian culture as fundamentally different from Western culture, which is shared by critics and followers of Russian nationalism alike. Both find explanations for Russia's otherness in her own distinctive culture which, they claim, has been formed in separation from the development of Western culture. In the standard account, there are primarily two historical factors that justify Russia's specific development: the reception of Christianity from Byzantium, and the Mongol invasion. The impact of these events led Russia away from Western individualism toward an acceptance of Eastern absolutism.

Samuel Huntington presents the most provocative argument for cultural difference based on religion. He argues that Russia is the core country of a separate civilization, "carrying and protecting a culture of Eastern Orthodoxy" and that "Europe ends where Western Christianity ends and . . . Orthodoxy begin[s]."[14] In contrast, Richard Pipes employs a political argument for Russia's difference. He claims that what distinguishes Western types of government from non-Western types is the existence of a distinction between political power and private property. In Russia, these institutions were never clearly separated, something Pipes claims accounts for the difficulties in restraining absolutism there. The absence of private property in Russia therefore prevented the development of liberalism and constitutionalism.[15] To the majority of Western scholars, the dichotomy between Russian and Western culture implies not only that the two cultures are fundamentally different, but also that an aversion to the latter is inherent in the former.

According to this view, the lack of what are generally believed to be typically Western values is seen as an expression of a flaw in Russian culture.

Western culture is defined in accordance with positive values, such as civilization, progress, liberty, democracy, openness, and friendliness. Russian culture is regarded as embracing opposite values. It therefore becomes barbarian, backward, intolerant, authoritarian, secluded, and antagonistic.[16] It is this perception of Russian culture that forms the basis for many Western assessments of Russian nationalism. Since this culture is perceived as distinct from Western culture and thereby embodies a string of negative characteristics, it follows that Russian nationalism, basing itself on Russia's national character, must promote these values, which are seen as destructive. Consequently, Russian nationalism has often been described as anti-Western, antagonistic, ethnic, and authoritarian in contrast to the liberal or civic nationalism, which allegedly characterizes most Western countries.[17] Hence, a dichotomy has been created between a good, liberal, rationalistic nationalism in the West and an evil, anti-Western deviation in the East.

As noted, Hans Kohn made the classic and most influential distinction between these two forms, claiming that "[w]hile Western nationalism was, in its origin, connected with the concepts of individual liberty and rational cosmopolitanism current in the eighteenth century, the later nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe and in Asia easily tended towards a contrary development."[18] More recently, the ideology of Russian nationalism has been portrayed as "antagonistic to all the main principles on which modern democracy is based" and seen as a "malignant and monolithic force that is unreformable and tends inexorably towards extreme forms of racism and authoritarianism." Its content is ethnic, collectivist, and authoritarian and infused with anti-Westernism.[19]

To explain this hostility to the West, scholars have long argued that Russians came to dislike the West since it served as the model for its development. "The dependence of the West often wounded the pride of the native educated class, as soon as it began to develop its own nationalism, and ended in an opposition to the 'alien' example and its liberal and rational outlook."[20] Hence, scholars have seen Europe as the Other in relation to which the idea of Russia is defined.[21] Thus, Liah Greenfeld claims that in Russia, *ressentiment* was the single most important factor in determining the terms in which national identity was defined.[22] Pointing to the role of Europe as the Other against which a Russian national identity must be formulated helps to uphold the dichotomy between a Russian and a Western culture. As a result of this thinking, it becomes impossible for Russians to advocate Western values and express a Russian national identity at the same time. When such attempts are made, no effort is spared to prove

either that the ideas are not really Western, or else that their aim is not to
express a Russian identity.

Following this logic, discovering similarities between the Russian Westerniz-
ers and the Slavophiles, Liah Greenfeld claims that the Westernizers were in
fact anti-Western nationalists, who, like the Slavophiles, were steeped in
ressentiment.[23] More common, however, is the perspective which holds that
the Westernizers represented the good, liberal, Western-oriented tendency
in Russia that had nothing to do with Russian nationalism. According to
this view, the Westernizers formulated values diametrically opposed to
Slavophilism, which they saw as "a provocative defence of outmoded val-
ues."[24] The contention here is that Slavophiles and Westernizers set out with
the same anxious concern for the absence of a Russian national culture and its
subsequent implications for the future of Russia. The solutions they presented
led in different directions, but neither side was steeped in resentment.[25]

In reformulating the common view of Slavophilism, this book ques-
tions the Russian-European dichotomy and the view of Russian national-
ism as antagonistic to the West. Instead, it seeks to present a more complex
image of the role of Europe and the West in shaping a Russian national
identity. Martin Malia's conception of Europe as a spectrum of zones
graded in level of development from the West to the East is useful to de-
scribe the complex position of Russian intellectuals in Europe.[26] Although
Russia was located in the extreme periphery, members of the educated elite
nevertheless saw themselves as part of Europe. Yet, the country's peripheral
location made the question of Russia's relationship to Europe problematic.
The Slavophiles wanted Russian culture to assume a leading role in a uni-
versal progress of humanity and to make a genuine contribution to the
world. The Slavophile project can thus be seen as a desire to claim a posi-
tion for Russia at the core of Europe.

Despite the great influence Slavophilism has exerted on Russian intellectual
life, the ideology was formulated by only four persons. Aleksei Khomiakov
(1804–1860) and Ivan Kireevsky (1806–1856), were the older originators;
Konstantin Aksakov (1817–1860) and Iurii Samarin (1819–1876) were
younger and became Slavophiles only when the core of Slavophile ideas was
already articulated. Although the movement was broader, other members
did not make any theoretically important contribution to Slavophilism.
Since Khomiakov and Kireevsky were the formulators and main contribu-
tors to Slavophile thought, this study is primarily based on their writings.[27]

The Slavophiles participated in a public discussion concerning the state of the Russian nation and culture. They were not the only participators, however. The Westernizers, who, as we have seen, are usually considered to have been the Slavophiles' ideological opponents, took part in this discourse as well. Those usually identified as the main figures of the Westernizer group were Vissarion Belinsky (1811–1848), Alexander Herzen (1812–1870), and Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876), who are commonly referred to as the radical Westernizers, and Timofei Granovsky (1813–1855), Vassilii Botkin (1811–1869), and Pavel Annenkov (1813–1887), who are regarded as more liberal.[28] Like the Slavophiles, the members of this group held diverging ideas and focused on different issues, both individually and as members of the radical or the liberal fraction. The latter differences mainly concerned their attitudes to religion, to the Jacobins of the French Revolution, and to art. But, their differences did not undermine the sense of common political aims.[29] Here, I am concerned only with the radical Westernizers, since their function in this study is to constitute a contrasting reference point to what is usually taken to be the much more conservative ideas of the Slavophiles.

The Westernizers are introduced into this work in order to show that Slavophile ideas were part of a discourse that engaged Russian intellectuals as a group and concerned their own role as both Russians and intellectuals. The contention here is that Slavophilism was formulated as an attempt to create a new identity, which involved both a new role for the nation and for the emerging critical intelligentsia; and that the two roles were intertwined. In formulating their ideas, the Slavophiles were thus trying to find a way out of a dual crisis of identity. Hence, their ideas are perceived as part of a critical discourse in Russia, that involved those who were dissatisfied with the contemporary state of Russian culture. In making this claim, this book challenges the assertion that in contrast to many European countries, nationalism and liberalism did not emerge as part of the same movement in Russia.[30]

The Slavophiles were not only involved in a Russian discourse on the future of their nation but were also part of a general European intellectual discussion, which we know as Romanticism, although more as receivers than as contributors.[31] The discourse about the Russian nation and culture was thus conducted in the idiom of Romanticism. This is seen both in the concepts that the Slavophiles used, the issues they discussed, and the arguments they pursued. It should be noted, however, that in looking at the Slavophiles in the context of Romanticism, I am not concerned with the origins of their Romantic notions, but rather with how the context of the Romantic world-

view can further an understanding of the way in which the Slavophiles presented their ideas and what they meant by them. In order to fully understand the formulation of Slavophilism, it is necessary to see it both in the context of the contemporary Russian intellectual criticism and in the context of the Romantic movement.

Official nineteenth-century apologies for the Russian regime were also based on the concept of the nation, but were made in a totally different context. In such accounts, the nation was placed next to orthodoxy and autocracy as the pillars of the state, but it was the state, rather than the nation, that was glorified. The nineteenth-century historian, Alexander Pypin, coined the term "Official Nationality" to describe the nature of these ideas. Although it was supported by a few independent-minded academics, this ideology was never meant to serve anything but the government. By providing an official definition of the Russian nation, the promulgation of this doctrine was intended to put an end to independent thoughts on the matter. Unofficial opinions were proscribed. The Slavophiles, like other independent thinkers in Russia, scorned "Official Nationality."[32]

Neither their concern with the Russian nation, nor the fact that all Slavophiles and most Westernizers belonged to the Russian gentry made them supporters of the regime. Both groups were constituted at a time in Russian history when the educated elite had been separated from the state and an intelligentsia had started to take form. They saw themselves as positioned between the people and the government. Although most of the members of this proto-intelligentsia were of noble origin, what united them was not their class, but their intellect. They believed that being an intellectual was equivalent to being independent-minded, and thus were, in general, critical towards the regime and its apologists. It is true that the Slavophiles at times cooperated with Stepan Shevyrev and Mikhail Pogodin, who have been seen as promoters of the doctrine of Official Nationality. But although the Slavophiles expressed an appreciation of certain aspects of their work, their opinions differed on many matters, most importantly on the role of the state and on their assessment of the reforms of Peter the Great. Furthermore, there was a great difference between these academics and the journalists Nikolai Grech and Faddei Bulgarin, who were considered base flatterers of the regime and the main exponents of "Official Nationality."

The Slavophiles were as repelled by the official doctrine as they were by Western rationalism.[33] They believed in the necessity of freedom of thought and expression and considered censorship, along with the control exercised

by the state on intellectual life, as a form of abuse. Not only were the Slavophiles' rejection of Peter the Great and their concept of a limited state displeasing to the tsar, but their emphasis on the village commune could also be considered offensive, since it implied approval of a measure of local self-government and criticism of increasing control by the bureaucracy.[34] Accordingly, the tsar regarded the Slavophiles as a threat and members of both the Slavophile and the Westernizer groups were affected by the strict censorship policy.[35]

The autocratic regime's desire to exercise an absolute monopoly of ideas—expressed in the establishment of the Third Department—deprived these intellectuals of the possibility to discuss their ideas in public.[36] Instead, they were forced into the "semi-private" sphere of salons, private clubs, and circles. Here, essays were read and debated and questions of literature and philosophy were discussed freely. Of course, this stifling situation was bound to have an impact on what was written. Russian intellectuals very likely engaged in self-censorship, and chose to deal with apolitical subjects that did not catch the censors' eye and implied things that could not be stated plainly. Nevertheless, there is also evidence that as long as there were no direct references to the tsar or his government, potentially subversive articles could get past the censor, as illustrated by the publication of Peter Chaadaev's "First Philosophical Letter," and Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*, for even though tsarist censorship was harsh, it was ineffective and not strictly enforced. At least until 1848, the tsar seems to have allowed writers some latitude and was halfhearted in his hostility towards unofficial opinions.[37] It is indeed difficult to know whether the Slavophiles would have been more critical of the regime had there been no censorship, but it is nevertheless safe to say that they would not have been less critical.

Certain methodological assumptions have guided this investigation of Slavophile thought. Treating the Slavophiles as self-conscious critics of Russian culture and society, their ideas are seen as the result of conscious action. Thus, I deliberately reject the idea that a key to understanding the Slavophiles, is to determine in what respect their ideas were the outcome of structural change in Russia. Such a perspective has made scholars present Slavophilism as the expression of the decline of the educated nobility, of the conflict between city and country, or of the specific character of Russian culture.[38] This book's aim has not been to find signs of economic, social, or cultural determination in Slavophile ideas. Neither has the intention been to identify the ideological origin of Slavophile thought in order to establish whether it emanated principally from German Roman-

ticism or from Eastern philosophy, a point that has generated considerable scholarly controversy.[39] Nor, finally, am I interested in Slavophilism as philosophy, that is as contributions to perennial questions without reference to the historical context in which they originated. Rather, I have treated Slavophile writings as interventions in a debate about Russian culture and society.

My interest is in the way ideas were used in a certain historical situation, involving specific actors. This approach to the study of intellectual history is associated with the methodological writings of Quentin Skinner, John Dunn, and John Pocock. These, and other historians of ideas reacted against the traditional study of political thought as a study of ideas about eternal questions, the answers to which were of immediate relevance to present-day reflections on society and politics. Instead, Skinner, Dunn, and Pocock argued that the aim of the history of ideas was to understand ideas in their historical context. Thus, Skinner argued that in order to reach a proper historical understanding of a text, we need to know what the writer intended to mean in writing a certain work. It is therefore necessary to be acquainted with the political, social, and, especially, the intellectual context, in which a writer wrote a text. Most importantly, we need to know what audience the writer was addressing and which works, actions, or phenomena he or she intended his or her writings to comment on.[40]

A consequence of my approach employed in this book is that the problems and issues the Slavophiles themselves address are taken seriously, even when these ideas seem superficial and repetitive. Therefore, this treatment of the Slavophiles is not concerned with the philosophical meaning and origin of the concept of *sobornost* (the orthodox principle of free unity in multiplicity), the notion of the "integrated personality," or the idea of communalism institutionalised in the *obshchina* (the village commune)—which usually make up the core of studies of the Slavophiles—but rather with the ideas that made the articulation of these well-known concepts essential in the first place. This does not mean that Slavophile thought can be defined in its entirety by the fundamental ideas presented here. Rather, it entails a new way of looking at the Slavophiles. While scholars have seen them as representatives of a distinctive Russian mind and therefore focused on concepts that can be seen as original to their thinking, or at least as a contribution to philosophy, this book aims to show what they hoped to achieve by developing and presenting their ideas.

Even though individual Slavophiles held diverging opinions in some cases, I refer to the cluster of their ideas as Slavophilism, as do most other students of Russian thought.[41] This is not only done for the purpose of