

CHAPTER IV

THE INTELLIGENTSIA

WHAT is the Intelligentsia? The word itself, or some more or less adequate translation of it, is frequently met with in the discussion of Russian public affairs, and The Intelligentsia. it is difficult to understand a great deal in Russian character and politics unless the intelligentsia be taken clearly into account. It is practically a separate class that goes under the name. To describe it as the educated or the literary class is not sufficient. An "intelligent," or member of the intelligentsia, is not merely an "intellectual" either. He is that and something more, and sometimes he is not quite that. There are points of resemblance between the Russian intelligentsia and the literary and professional class in other countries, in Germany, France, Italy, and especially in England. The German romantic movement of the early part of the last century, certain aspects of the French Bohème, Fleet Street, Grub Street, the Labour and Women's Suffrage Movements present many analogies with the Russian intelligentsia, but there is nothing altogether like this class in any part of the world. Whereas the intellectuals of other countries enter more or less completely into the life of their environment and conform to its rules and customs, the life of the Russian intelligentsia has been hitherto a constant protest against the existing order. The distinguishing feature of the intelligentsia was not that its members wrote books and articles or discussed literary and social questions, but that they did this in the name of a higher political and social order that was to replace the existing order. Everything they did was permeated with the desire for liberation, for reform. The nature of the reform required was conceived of differently at different periods and by various groups. Some dreamed of Russia as a

land of self-governing communities, of true-hearted Orthodox Christians under the aegis of the autocracy, others wanted to make Russia into a federation of Communes without the autocracy, others proclaimed a reign of science and reason, denounced all tradition, and, on the strength of such manuals of crude materialism as Büchner's *Kraft und Stoff*, declared poetry, art, and personal beauty to be mere instruments of reaction. Some advocated Agrarian Socialism, a later generation preached Marxian Socialism.

It is the subordination of all intellectual effort and indeed of personal habits to a supreme interest in social reform that gives the Russian intelligentsia its peculiar colouring, that constitutes its strength and its weakness. And it is just this characteristic that makes it possible to mark off the intelligentsia with precision from the rest of the community: Not every literary man was an "intelligent," though in certain of his habits and moods, perhaps, even in his convictions, he **might present many points of affinity with the intelligentsia.** Tolstoy was certainly not an intelligent, though at one time he associated with the literary men in St. Petersburg, wrote in the "thick journals," and engaged in fierce disputes on general topics. But the type did not appeal to him, and he rarely described it in his novels, approaching it only when a class that did interest him—the country gentlemen, for instance, as in *Anna Karenina*—happened to be in a frame of mind corresponding with that of the intelligentsia, and argued hotly on political questions. And Tolstoy's religious views were repugnant to the majority of the intelligentsia, just as the intelligentsia habit of mind was repugnant to him. Turgeniev, again, was not an intelligent. He was keenly interested in the intelligentsia, associated with, and frequently described in his novels, its members. His heroes, Rudin, in the novel of the same name, Bazarov, in *Fathers and Sons*, and most of the characters in *Smoke* are intelligents. But Turgeniev described them as an outsider, as a highly cultivated country gentleman who would never

quite consent to identify himself with the intelligentsia class. Dostoievsky again, was, and was not, an intelligent. He was a townsman, and lived like a typical intelligent, a restless, hand-to-mouth, irregular life, among debts and manuscripts, and with long nights of heated argument. Yet the intelligentsia did not claim him as its own, and not until many years after his death did it fully and ungrudgingly recognise his genius.

In fact, literary or artistic genius or a devotion to literary and aesthetic, rather than to social and political interests, very frequently had the effect of placing a man outside the pale of the intelligentsia in the strictest sense of the word. This section of the community bore the character of a religious body rather than that of a literary class. Its attitude resembled that of the Puritans and their successors, Quakers, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists. It had a Nonconformist conscience. Only the ideal pursued was not that of the salvation of the individual soul—for nearly four decades the majority of the Russian intelligentsia did not believe in the existence of the soul—but the salvation of Russia, the salvation of the people. It was an ideal of social and personal liberty that demanded constant personal service and the subordination of all other interests to its attainment. It involved intense humanitarianism, an enthusiastic attachment to the common people, because they were common people, because they were poor, oppressed, and suffering. "From those who exult and foolishly chatter and dye their hands in blood," wrote Nekrasov, the typical poet of the intelligentsia, "lead me away to the camp of those who are perishing for the great cause of love."

Ethical fervour, constant devotion, even in the darkest days of oppression, to an ideal of political and social redemption, immense personal sacrifices, contempt for the goods of this world—these were the noble qualities that gave the intelligentsia its power and constitutes its claim to profound respect. These were the qualities which, together with a

genuine and unflagging thirst for knowledge, a delight in ideas for their own sake, a restless and widely-ranging mental activity, and a desire to impart enlightenment to the weakest and the humblest, made the intelligentsia the pioneers of Russian development during the last century. As against the hard mechanical conception of the despotic state, the corruption of the bureaucracy, and the systematic suppression of personal initiative, the intelligents' self-sacrificing insistence on the necessity of knowledge, justice, and liberty, and on high ethical and social values had the force of a sturdy and resolute witness-bearing. The members of the intelligentsia were constantly imbued with the sense of a mission. Some were revolutionaries, some carried on clandestine propaganda in Russia, others worked and organised abroad. But the majority remained at home and worked openly. Of these some sat in the cities, taught in schools and universities, wrote in the "thick journals," read German, French, and English science and philosophy, argued, disputed, criticised. Others worked in the *Zemstvos* as doctors or agricultural experts, or as school teachers in the villages, or opened little libraries for the people whenever they could wring permission from the Administration, carried on a constant struggle with the authorities on points of law in order to gain a little clear space, some slight opportunities for imparting knowledge to the peasantry, or for helping the suffering, worked devotedly in Famine Relief and served as doctors and nurses in time of war. Women worked side by side with men on a basis of complete equality, and frequently were leaders in organisation; in fact, one of the remarkable features of the intelligentsia was the number of strong and able women it brought to the front. And in all the work predominated the feeling of a duty to be done, of a debt to be paid to the people. It was a kind of religious service, and this, though the majority of the intelligents demonstratively claimed to be atheists, and professed a rigid and uncompromising materialism.

Many of the defects of the intelligents naturally flowed from their qualities. Dogmatism, narrowness, and a censorious spirit were common. Frequently an idealist contempt for the goods of this world, and hostility to aestheticism, degenerated into personal untidiness and slovenliness in the conduct of personal affairs. Sincerity was often interpreted as meaning indifference to the amenities of social intercourse, identification with the interests of the people was often considered to mean not only the adoption of a peasant costume, but also an intentional roughness of manner. The bitterness of the struggle with the autocracy engendered intolerance, an impatience of others' opinions. And difference of opinion on political or literary questions was frequently regarded as morally reprehensible. The man who did not conform to the prevailing attitude of the intelligentsia was looked upon with suspicion, if he displayed indications of attachment to the Church or other traditional institutions he was shunned as a reactionary. Intolerance extended even to trifles. A few years ago a literary man, who happened to be a landed proprietor, brought his wife to a gathering of a radical literary group with which he was connected. His wife was coldly received, and it afterwards appeared that the cause of offence was that she wore diamond earrings.

Again the devotion of the intelligentsia to theory, especially to the latest philosophical and social theories of France and Germany blunted the sense of reality and made the average Russian even more unpractical than he was compelled to be through lack of any opportunity for action. He saw the march of events through a haze of hypothesis and logical syllogism. In long and noisy disputes around the samovar in rooms clouded with cigarette smoke he analysed political occurrences from various philosophical and sociological standpoints, estimating their significance from the point of view of a remote ideal, but very often missing their immediate impact on sensibility. An enormous amount of time and energy was wasted in solving mere verbal misunderstandings.

The intelligentsia tended to lose sight of colour, action, spontaneous movement, the play of the instincts, the simple elemental process of living. It evaded nature. It theorised even when of set purpose it returned to Nature and founded Tolstoyan colonies. The very simplicity of the intelligents' manner of life and their good-natured habits of mutual help freed them from the insistent pressure of economic demands in an extreme form. They lived remote from the world, as it were, on an island. It was never absolutely necessary for them to be business-like, and the conditions were not such as to encourage habits of punctuality. There was even a prejudice against a business-like habit of mind, it was considered petty and "bourgeois," and indicative of an excessive desire for material welfare. Theory dominated over life, and profoundly influenced personal habits, dress, the training of children, the relations between husband and wife. It even influenced the speech of daily life, making it bookish, abstract, and colourless, depriving it of that wealth of imagery which makes the language of the Russian common people a delight to hear. The dominance of sociological theories also affected literary taste, and works of art were judged from the standpoint of social utility, rather than from that of beauty. "Aesthetics are the Cain who killed his brother Abel, Ethics," declared the critic Mikhailovsky, who for many years held sway over the minds of a large proportion of the Russian intelligentsia. Critics paid attention mainly to the political and social content of the works they studied, demanded realism pure and simple, and condemned the play of fancy. In a popular *History of Literature*, published a few years ago, considerable space is devoted to the discussion of the social and political ideas in the work of the poet Alexis Tolstoy, an aristocrat and a lover of beauty, who held aloof from politics. Chehov, a shrewd, sceptical, and talented writer of short stories, who was bored by the "thick journals," and shunned the intelligentsia, died in 1904. In 1906, after the promulgation of the Constitution and the formation of

political parties, a literary critic in a public lecture, discussed the question as to which party Chehov would have joined if he had been alive, and came to the conclusion that he would probably have been a Constitutional Democrat.

Sometimes the reign of dogma, the habit of holding reality at a distance by means of theory led to a certain insincerity. The very gregariousness of the intelligentsia made this inevitable. There was a great deal of mere lip allegiance to current doctrine. By no means every member of the intelligentsia did his thinking for himself; many lived solely on borrowed ideas, and frequently disputes were a mere bandying of authorities. Mikhailovsky, Chernishevsky, Marx, Engels, Spencer, Buckle, Nietzsche were names that constantly did duty for arguments. And then human nature would have its way in spite of dogma. To wear evening dress would have been considered by most members of the intelligentsia an indication of degraded bourgeois taste. But it was one time the custom among literary men not to shave, and to wear the hair long, and some were distinctly foppish in the attention they paid to their coiffure. Many in their sturdy democracy refused to wear starched shirts, and preferred the blouse as worn by the Russian peasant and working man. But an inextinguishable aesthetic instinct displayed itself in the choice of striking colours for the blouse or in embroidery on the breast, at the waist or on the fringes. And when a girl student wore her hair short and incessantly smoked cigarettes, she did so not simply to defy convention, but because in her set it was the thing to do, just as in another set which she abhorred, it was the thing to go to balls and wear evening dress. It would be a mistake, too, to imagine that gatherings of the intelligentsia were devoted solely to disputes on abstract questions. Three or four might argue hotly, while others would simply exchange impressions, or dutifully submit to be bored, or gossip as easily and as pleasantly as human beings gossip the world over, from Notting Hill to Hong Kong. The life of the intelligents

was simple, but not ascetic. Many members drank to excess, and there were some who drank themselves to death in search of a refuge from the terrible depression that hung constantly over the Russian educated man, and made the life of the intelligentsia essentially a sad one.

One may easily do injustice to the intelligentsia by emphasising certain of its aspects that lend themselves to satire and to caricature. Such aspects were sharply characterised by Turgeniev in his *Smoke*, and ferociously condemned by Dostoevsky in his novel *The Possessed*. The intelligentsia, though a distinct and separate class, was by no means altogether of a piece. There were extremists and moderates, there were various parties and a great diversity of types of character. The Symbolist writers and advocates of Art for Art's sake, who made their appearance towards the end of the nineteenth century, were members of the intelligentsia, although they were violently attacked by the prevailing school. So were many Slavophiles, and convinced and deeply religious supporters of the Church, and opponents of philosophical materialism. In the homes of some members of the intelligentsia there was a gracious and soothing tradition of real culture combined with a refinement of manner that was the more charming because of its absolute sincerity. In other homes there was occasionally a depressing crudity of thought and speech and a noisy self-assertiveness. But all members of the intelligentsia were united by a common temper, by a profound sense of life as a problem, and by a constantly thwarted and baffled desire to find ultimate solutions.

The intelligentsia occupies, or has until now occupied, such a strictly delimited position in Russian life that it must, as has been pointed out, be regarded as a distinct social class. Officially there are five classes in the Empire, the gentry, the merchants, the clergy, the *mieschhane*, or petite bourgeoisie, and the peasantry. In the early part of the last century literature was almost exclusively the business of the gentry,

but from the sixties onward representatives of the other classes, students of theological seminaries, artisans, merchants' sons, and peasants gathered round the literary monthlies and took their place among the intelligentsia. The University system, adapted by the Government from the German system, made it possible for most clever youths who had succeeded in fighting their way through the secondary schools to pass through a course of higher education, and it was the universities which filled the ranks of the intelligentsia. The development of higher education for women, the opening of Women's University Colleges and Medical Schools, largely increased the number of women in the literary and professional class. Not only were various social classes represented in the intelligentsia, but there was a sprinkling of non-Russian nationalities. There was a considerable number of Jews, and there were also Little Russians and a few Poles, and a certain number of Armenians and Georgians. The intelligentsia also included Government officials of Liberal or Radical views, and, in fact, there were a good many points of contact between **the bureaucracy and the intelligentsia.** Those same higher educational institutions which constituted a recruiting ground for the intelligentsia, gave the Government a constant supply of officials. And in certain respects the intelligentsia's habit of mind was akin to that of the bureaucracy, especially in its abstract character, its faith in the virtue of words and formulas, and of schemes set down on paper.

In writing of the intelligentsia the past tense is almost unavoidable, because of the great changes that have taken place in the class during the last few years. The Revolution brought the intelligentsia into rude and sudden contact with reality, put its dogmas and doctrines to the severest possible test. Doctrines were brushed aside by elemental forces, and instincts dulled by an inveterate habit of generalisation failed to respond adequately and decisively to the startling appeal of facts. The intelligentsia has been bitterly blamed for the failure of the Constitutional movement and for the

triumph of reaction, but it would be unfair to make it responsible for what was largely historically inevitable. Considering the enforced isolation from real life to which the intelligentsia was condemned in the pre-constitutional period, it is difficult to see how it could have developed in a high degree the qualities of practical efficiency. It was only in the Zemstvos and Municipal Councils that it had an opportunity for administrative training, and it is significant that it is the Zemstvos that have given some of the most capable and practical workers in the broad field of Imperial politics.

But in any case the political turmoil of the last ten years has made the Russian intelligentsia something very different from what it was. It has lost its exclusiveness. It is no longer so distinctively a class apart. Its members engage more frequently in practical work. Some are deputies, some have gone into business. In spite of the reaction, a steady social and economic development is in progress, and in this development the intellectuals are taking their share. Hundreds are living in exile or in banishment abroad, and over such the traditions of the pre-constitutional period still have a strong hold. Faith in many of the dogmas of the intelligentsia has been profoundly shaken, and perplexity and a spirit of scepticism prevails. And at the same time certain new tendencies are making themselves felt, nationalism as opposed to the once prevalent cosmopolitanism, a new sense of the State as opposed to the former negative attitude of the intelligentsia to the State as an organism, and to State-action of every kind, and also a growing respect for religious sentiment in its various manifestations as opposed to the aggressive materialism that was once so common. Political parties have, to a certain extent, taken the place of the intelligentsia and the intellectuals seem little by little, in spite of very unfavourable conditions, to be taking their place in a broader national life. They seem, in fact, to be in process of becoming intellectuals of the German or English type.

But the traditions of a century of lofty and disinterested

thinking, of loyalty to great ideas, of struggle and of sacrifice are still fresh and vivid, the traditions of the first Russian critic Bielinsky and his successors, Dobroliubov, Lavrov, and Mikhailovsky, of that penetrating political thinker Herzen, of the tumultuous anarchist Bakunin, of Turgeniev and Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, and of the idealist Slavophiles Aksakov, Kireev, and Homiakov. The band of high-minded, enlightened, humane, and keenly sensitive men who passed through the strange and bitter experience of living under an autocracy, while the Europe of the nineteenth century made its triumphant progress—these were the men who made the Russian intelligentsia what it is. And such an intelligentsia cannot wholly disappear, can never become exactly like the intellectuals of any country in the world.