THE INTELLIGENTSIA FIGHTS BACK:

The Left-wing Response to *Vekhi* and its Significance*Christopher Read*

Vekhi has enjoyed at least three lives. Its original one, of course, came in 1909 and 1910, when it was the intellectual sensation of the age. Some of its admirers revived part of its spirit in *Iz glubiny* (*Out of the Depths*), written but not circulated in 1918.¹ The second life came in the 1960s. This was no accident; both collections were re-published in Paris as student rebellions and revolutionary movements spread around the world. *Vekhi* in this revival became something of a symbol of opposition to the *soixante-huitards* and was a marginal tool in the cultural Cold War. Revolution was in the air, in a variety of forms, from Berkeley to West Berlin and from Prague to Saigon. In the forefront were students, and polemics around their activities were increasingly intense as campus after campus exploded. Among those not sharing the ethos of exuberance and radicalization were Richard Pipes and Leonard Schapiro. Pipes was working on his excellent biography of Petr Struve and editing his collected works. Schapiro had already written one of the few articles of the time devoted to *Vekhi*, calling it “*Vekhi* and the Mystique of Revolution.” In a limited way, *Vekhi* had become an “anti-sixties” manifesto. As the headiness of the sixties subsided, so too did the profile of *Vekhi*. For the best part of two more decades it sank deeper out of sight, into a half-life in which only a handful of people were working on or around it.² However, it was still known about, not only in the west but also among Soviet historians and specialists. Ironically, memory of it in its homeland had been preserved through Lenin having devoted an article to refuting it. In fact, *Vekhism* (*vekhovstvo*) was a more favored theme in Soviet journals of the seventies

and early eighties than in western ones. It had become an intellectual peg on which Soviet ideologists could conveniently hang a whole array of their liberal critics. Interestingly, but not entirely accurately, by 1980 I. I. Mints was linking interest in *Vekhi* with the rise of the new right in Britain and the United States. In a review of Pipes's work on Struve, he claimed that Struve, in Pipes's view, was a forerunner of Ronald Reagan. There was some truth in that: Pipes, of course, was Reagan's National Security Advisor on the Soviet Union from 1981 to 1982. However, there is something here worth bringing to the fore: *Vekhi* had become a symbol, almost a brand name, a logo, for a certain kind of opposition to a loosely-defined leftism.

Vekhi's third, present, life was generated by its having been "rediscovered" in the land of its birth, a rediscovery foreshadowed by that of Aleksander Solzhenitsyn and a handful of 1970s and '80s dissidents.³ It gained a reputation for having, in some way, predicted the collapse of the revolutionary system, which eventually came about in 1991, a system that was deemed by many to embody the mechanistic, materialist, amoral, irreligious, unspiritual, anti-individualistic, and utilitarian principles that the *Vekhi* authors descried in the radical intelligentsia.

The present volume contains studies of numerous aspects of all these "lives." However, there is at least one intriguing difference between them: in its original life, *Vekhi* was largely reviled by the majority of its readers; in its second life it had admirers and critics; and in its third, post-Soviet, life it has largely been acclaimed, often uncritically. True, a volume of comments was entitled "*Vekhi*": *pro et contra* ("*Vekhi*": *For and Against*),⁴ but that was something of an exception. The aim of the present study is to re-examine some of the original criticisms of *Vekhi*, which are often overlooked amid the contemporary adulation. The questions pursued in this essay are: how did the defenders of the intelligentsia tradition react to *Vekhi*, and what does their response tell us? To answer them, the focus will be on the responses of leading liberals and populists, with a brief glance at social democrats. Particular attention will be paid to the Constitutional Democrats' (Kadet) *sbornik* entitled *Intelligentsiia v Rossii* (*The Intelligentsia in Russia*, 1910), the Socialist Revolutionaries' (SR) "*Vekhi*" *kak znamenie vremeni* ("*Vekhi*" *as a Sign of the Times*, 1910), and

Lenin's response, which, though short, did preserve memory of *Vekhi* in the way mentioned above. In the conclusion, a number of observations about these criticisms will be made.

1909: REACTION AND CONTEXT

The publication of *Vekhi* in February 1909 set off a chain reaction. The contributors, mocked later by Merezhkovskii for their "false" modesty,⁵ claimed to be saying nothing new.⁶ However, the debate it set off was a defining event in early-twentieth-century intellectual history in Russia. Responses came from all parts of the intellectual spectrum. It was something like a spark falling in a box of fireworks: the ensuing explosion was colorful but chaotic. However, of all the comments one might make about the controversy around *Vekhi*, one of the few that is indisputable is that, as already mentioned, the overwhelming majority of reactions were hostile. This simple fact has not always been given its due. How do we account for the fierce reaction, and what did *Vekhi's* opponents have to say?

The unexpected scale of its initial impact depended, not entirely but to a significant degree, on it appearing at a moment of gloom and despondency among the intelligentsia. Its impact was multiplied by its apparent renegade attack on people already reeling from the defeat of 1905–07. Today it is easy to underestimate the widespread contempt felt by ordinary, decent people within Russia and beyond for the anachronistic, apparently unreformable, and, in the hands of Nicholas II, antisemitic, backward-looking, and cruel autocracy. It was not necessary to be a radical to dislike tsarism intensely. Its violent repression of unarmed protest in January 1905 and on many other occasions through 1905–07 not only sowed the seeds of counter-violence from below but also made autocracy an object of contempt across western Europe. Russia was a pariah state. True, the impact of this international contempt was mitigated by the geopolitics of the period, which led to the somewhat hypocritical but "necessary" spectacle of Europe's two most democratic great powers, Britain and France, falling over themselves to ally with Russia, as a counterweight to their common enemy, a resurgent imperial Germany. Nonetheless, the depth of intellectual hostility remained great. Within Russia itself, though the worst of the armed repression had

faded by 1909, there was still sufficient state violence to enable Tolstoi, in a famous essay on the death penalty, to complain about the continuation of “executions, executions, executions.”⁷ The ferocity of people’s attitudes is shown by non-revolutionaries as well, like Leonid Andreev, who claimed that even moderates, including those who had a weak religious faith, hated government ministers so much that they would secretly pray for their deaths. Even so, when one of them—Lev Kasso, the Education Minister—did die of cancer, there was little satisfaction in it because, Andreev complained, his death had prevented him from being brought to justice.⁸ It was not only the left that was horrified by the political situation. For quite different reasons, many on the right were sceptical of tsarism’s ability to deliver stability. Its inefficiencies threatened to provoke revolution, which in turn would destroy the privileges of the landed and office-holding elite. Anachronistic elements, like antisemitism, were seen as particularly dangerous. In the most infamous antisemitic episode of the period, the 1911–13 investigation and trial of Mendel Beilis on a trumped-up charge of ritual murder of a Christian child in Kiev, Beilis’s defense was undertaken by a center-right Duma deputy, Vasilii Maklakov. Even the elites were tired of being excluded from power and increasingly feared for their positions as tsarism stumbled blindly from crisis to crisis, culminating in the Lena goldfields shootings in 1912.⁹ Perhaps one of the main reasons for the underestimation, decades later, of the atmosphere of the period is that, compared to an era like the 1930s, the degree of repression is *relatively* small. However, to cite French level-crossings, “[u]n train peut-en cacher un autre” (one train can hide another). More appropriately, in this case, *un mal peut-en cacher un autre*—one evil can hide another. Taking into account the fact that tsarism also has to bear a not-inconsiderable part of the blame for creating a culture in which extremism could not only survive but could break out into a mass movement, it is no defense of tsarism to say that Stalinism was worse. Obviously, no one knew in 1909 what lay in store for Russia. Setting aside the historian’s advantage of hindsight, it is incontrovertible that there was a widespread opposition to and even visceral hatred of tsarism among elites, intellectuals, workers, and peasants. Only by recognizing this is it possible to comprehend why *Vekhi* was met with a massive volley of abuse. While historical parallels can be misleading, *Vekhi*’s, or at least Struve’s, call

for reconciliation with the autocracy had an impact comparable to, say, a former South African radical calling for co-operation with the apartheid regime a year or two after the Sharpeville massacre, or for a supporter of Allende calling for reconciliation with Pinochet shortly after the latter came to power over a football stadium of executed victims.

Does *Vekhi* deserve this reputation? It certainly did not see itself as crudely “right-wing” or conservative, and some of its contributors, notably Nikolai Berdiaev and Sergei Bulgakov, saw it as in its own way genuinely revolutionary, compared to what they saw as the false revolutionary commitment of those it criticized. That, too, opens up another question: which *Vekhi*? While Struve has, by and large, been the author most quoted by critics, his article was in no way “typical” of *Vekhi* as a whole. In truth, no article was. Berdiaev and Bulgakov were spiritual warriors; Mikhail Gershenzon, Bogdan Kistiakovskii, and Semen Frank were more stereotypical “liberal” intellectuals; and Struve, and to some extent Aleksandr Izgoev, were conservatives, at least in the making.

The two intellectual/political schools of the period which have attracted the most attention have been the liberals (Kadets) and the social-democratic Marxists (SDs). At one level this is completely absurd, because they were among the least influential and widespread schools at the time. Kadet liberalism only began to take on shape in 1905, and comprised only a small number of members, supporters, and natural voters (i.e., core supporters, not those who boosted its votes by using it as the only vehicle for supporters of banned or restricted parties). The Social Democrats, too, were highly aware of their vulnerable minority status at the time, which was an important consideration that caused many on both of its wings, in 1905 and after, to attempt reconciliation rather than deepen and widen the split between them, thereby making it permanent. To split an already tiny minority group was rightly considered to be insane, even at times by one of its chief proponents, Lenin. On the other hand, important groups like the Octobrists and the populist-based Socialist Revolutionaries (who were by far the most influential and widespread group of the era), have not been studied in anything like the same detail, especially in terms of their ideas and principles in the period from 1905 to 1917. The Octobrists, by almost all criteria, stand outside the intelligentsia and observed the controversy more

or less from without, but I will look more closely at the rather neglected SR response to *Vekhi*. First, however, an examination of some key responses from Kadet liberals.

THE LIBERALS AND *VEKHI*

The official Kadet response to *Vekhi* came in the form of a *sbornik* entitled *The Intelligentsia in Russia*.¹⁰ In it, many leading party members were wheeled out to refute the volume. The longest, and possibly most tedious, contribution came from the party leader Pavel Miliukov. In a rather ponderous, professorial tone, Miliukov defined the core of *Vekhi*'s criticism to be a charge of "apostasy" (*otshchepenstvo*) against the intelligentsia. The apostasy had three components—the intelligentsia's supposed irreligiousness; its hostility to the concept of the state; and its lack of national feeling, its cosmopolitanism (30). For Miliukov, it was in the nature of the intelligentsia to be cut off from the masses. The intelligentsia *should*, he said, be in the position of Socrates vis-à-vis the people (33). It *should* be proud to be separate from the people. As for the chief cause of its separation, religion, Miliukov said very little, not least, it seems, because he could scarcely believe the *Vekhi* authors were serious in bringing it back into intellectual debate.

Regarding the accusation by Struve in particular that the intelligentsia was characterized by an attitude of hostility to the state (*antigosudarstvennost'*), Miliukov was a little more comfortable. *Vekhi* was wrong, in his view, for several reasons. First, only extremists, maximalists—that is, largely anarchists—actually opposed the state. Though he does not mention it, he might have supported his argument by pointing out that all of the democratic parties—liberal, SR, and SD—made the calling of a constituent assembly their first programmatic demand. Second, he defended the need for society, and related institutions such as law, as a base for the defense of individual freedom. In an area which blends a critique of *Vekhi*'s stances on religion and on the state, Miliukov linked *Vekhi*'s granting primacy to inner life over outer restraints to counter-revolutionary romanticism of the early nineteenth century in western Europe, neglecting to note that this very romanticism also had links to support for the French revolution and indeed

to early liberalism. In this sense, this particular accusation exploded, as it were, in Miliukov's own hands. He was, however, in a safer place when he also linked this trait to Slavophilism, though he greatly overstated the extent to which *Vekhi* shared the religious obscurantism that he, as an anticlerical, atheist, enlightened, westernizing intellectual, discerned at the heart of Slavophile thinking.

Finally, and sometimes surprisingly to those who are not familiar with the immediate context of the post-1905 years, Miliukov stoutly defended the Russian intelligentsia tradition and its combative and revolutionary acts and ambitions. The intelligentsia, which he defined not as the educated class but as a concentric circle of creative thinkers and activists within the educated class (94), was the pride of Russia. He recalled its achievements, notably its opposition to serfdom and hostility to autocracy, and failures. He did not himself closely define the tradition, but one of the other contributors, Ivan Petrunkevich, did, naming the familiar quartet of Belinskii, Herzen, Chernyshevskii, and Mikhailovskii as its spiritual sources (39). The claim, which put liberalism firmly within the Russian revolutionary tradition, remains a stark reminder that using identical terminology for Russian and western phenomena, in this case the concept of liberalism, can cause significant differences to be concealed. By and large, western liberals put a greater distance between themselves and revolution, at least in their own countries.

Where *The Intelligentsia in Russia* was frequently rather petty and pedantic, two other liberal responses were rather more engaging. Writing separately in the liberal journal *Russkaia mysl'* (*Russian Thought*), Aleksandr Kizevetter and Semen Lur'e gave a more imaginative set of reasons for liberal opposition to *Vekhi's* project.¹¹ Both writers took the position that, in many ways, *Vekhi* had highlighted the problems of the intelligentsia correctly but had identified completely wrong solutions. In Kizevetter's opinion, as stated in his article focused on Bulgakov, Gershenzon, and Kistiakovskii, it was not necessary to withdraw into internal life; rather, one should do exactly the opposite. What was needed was "intensified and conscious participation in practical activity in society" (133). Gershenzon, he argued, was mistaken in seeing all *intelligenty* as leading superficial and neurotic lives. He was also very hostile to the religious aspect, stating that in *Vekhi*, "in place of

the rattle of the gendarme's sabre I hear the clink of the censor" (129). Lur'e based his defense of the intelligentsia on the Latin proverb "*primum vivere, deinde philosophare*" (137). It was all very well for *Vekhi* to offer religious and philosophical nostrums, but there was practical work to be done first. Lur'e energetically defended the intelligentsia tradition for its focus on alleviating the suffering of the "humiliated and the injured," quoting the title of Dostoevskii's novel *Unizhennye i oskorblennye* (*The Humiliated and the Injured*). The intelligentsia should be praised, not blamed, for putting the interests of the people ahead of its own and for having chivalric qualities (143). The intelligentsia, Lur'e agreed, did have the people's welfare as its absolute value, but it was right to do so—certainly it is superior to *Vekhi's* (or at least Frank's) placing of culture as its absolute value: one has to live first, only then can one engage in philosophy (146). Lur'e admitted that some groups of the intelligentsia were beyond defense—"to combat practical nihilism one does not need publicists but psychiatrists" (141)—but that was no reason to attack its healthier components. Like Kizevetter, Lur'e found the religious revivalism of *Vekhi* to be incomprehensible among educated, civilized people.

All in all, the liberals presented a robust defense of their social action, perhaps surprisingly robust when it's compared to that of their counterparts in the west, indicating, as we have already noted, how a term like "liberal" can be transformed in meaning when implanted in a new culture. True, they did stress the importance of institutions, a constitution, and law as necessary guarantors of individual freedom. However, they failed to exploit what could be seen as one of the greatest inconsistencies, even contradictions, within *Vekhi*. Berdiaev's (and Gershenzon's) insistence on the primacy of inner life over external forms could be seen as an excellent illustration of the truth of Kistiakovskii's accusation regarding a lack of awareness of law's importance among Russian intellectuals and also, perhaps, that of Struve's accusation of alienation from state and nation.

In his classic account of Russian liberalism, George Fischer pointed out that in a backward society (in the terminology of the time) liberals are caught between the tactics of collaborating with the oppressive authorities in the hope of gaining concessions and out-and-out revolutionary opposition.¹² In this situation, the Kadets were theoretically defending the latter course

of action but were, in practice, getting closer and closer to adopting the former. In many ways, this moment of possible transition was central to the *Vekhi* debate, to the liberals themselves but also to their critics even further to the left. SR writers such as Viktor Chernov agreed: liberalism was doomed to be caught at the crossroads because of an “enormous disparity between its program and its tactics.” The Kadets retained radical aims—for a constituent assembly and land reform—alongside a desire to work within the system as a kind of loyal opposition to His Majesty.¹³ The remnants of the intelligentsia tradition interfered with this new posture, and Struve opened up a way of escape to enable them to reconcile with forces further to the right (20). Thus the intelligentsia was trapped. Any move to the right would discredit it with the left, but would risk being insufficient to earn the confidence of the right. Any step to the left would have the same impact in reverse, discrediting it with the right but not gaining credibility with the left (21). Fate had put the liberals in this position, which corresponded to Russian historical conditions. Russia lacked a strong, independent “liberal bourgeoisie prepared to fight courageously and decisively for political freedom” (20–21). The middle class, such as it was, was attempting to adapt the Kadet party to its own immediate interests and to throw out any superfluous remaining traces of “love of the people” and desires of the “third element” (22).

SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC RESPONSES

Among Social Democrats, the embourgeoisement of the intelligentsia was the standard response, running through literary cultural criticism by Vladimir Friche, Vladimir Bazarov (Rudnev), and Nikolai Valentinov (Vol'skii) and more sociological analyses by Leon Trotskii and Aleksandr Bogdanov. These last were partially influenced by the theory of Jan Wacław Machajski, stating that socialism was the class ideology of the intelligentsia as a cover for its claim to be a ruling elite.¹⁴ However, the Social Democratic position on *Vekhi* was pithily summed up by Lenin: *Vekhi* was “an encyclopaedia of liberal renegacy.”¹⁵ There was not much more to the SD position beyond, first, the embourgeoisement theory, which was partly true in the broad sense; second, the assumption that this led to compromise

with the autocracy; and third, the more questionable assumption that *Vekhi* was simply supportive of the Kadets. The Kadet polemic against this was surely evidence of greater complexity, but Lenin did not acknowledge this. It could be instantly dismissed: “*Vekhi* is good because it discloses the whole spirit of the *real* policy of the Russian liberals and of the Russian Kadets included among them. That is why the Kadet polemic with *Vekhi* and the Kadet renunciation of *Vekhi* are nothing but hypocrisy, sheer idle talk, for, in reality the Kadets collectively, as a party, as a social force, have pursued and are pursuing the policy of *Vekhi* and *no other*.”¹⁶

THE SOCIALIST REVOLUTIONARIES RESPOND

One of the interesting features of the debate is how little influence the Social Democrats in general and Lenin in particular had on it. The great denunciations of *Vekhi* by liberals, populists, and others, not to mention *Vekhi* itself, paid little or no attention to the specifically SD school of thought. It was in fact the SRs who produced the most interesting, thoroughgoing, competent, and comprehensive reply to *Vekhi*, “*Vekhi*” as *a Sign of the Times*.¹⁷ The collection consists of eight contributions but, although his name does not appear at all, three of them are by Chernov under the pseudonyms Iu. Gardenin, B. Iur’ev, and Ia. Vechev. With some justification, the contributors believed that they themselves, the SRs, were the chief target of *Vekhi*. “Yes! We stand at the centre of their attention and we should be proud” (10). “We are the sun in the planetary system of their opponents.” (11)

In a hard-hitting overview from which the above quotations were taken, Chernov/Gardenin led the attack on *Vekhi* on behalf of the SRs. In a phrase which became the title of the collection, he identified *Vekhi* as “a sign of the times [*znamenie vremeni*],” or even better, he went on, as “a sign of stagnating times [*znamenie bezvremen’ia*].” Its success on the book market and as an intellectual phenomenon was a “*succès de scandale*” (1), a phrase used much later by Frank in his memoirs.¹⁸ Nonetheless, he went on, it was “worth more serious attention than it had hitherto been given.” This was, in Gardenin’s view, nothing less than “the most reactionary book of the last decade. In this respect *Vekhi* defeated Pobedonostsev’s

Moskovskii sbornik (*Memoirs of a Russian Statesman*).... The naive and direct ‘old-style’ reaction pales into insignificance compared to the subtle [*utonchennyi*] and out-and-out [*makhrovyyi*] reaction in the modern style” (1). These were very large claims. Gardenin himself used thirty-seven large format pages to back them up, and the collection as a whole ran to 352 pages, nearly three times the length of *Vekhi* itself. What was it that the SRs found so despicable in *Vekhi*? For Gardenin, the first and fundamental point was that, as former members of the extreme left, the *Vekhi* contributors were, in the post-1905 atmosphere, the leading spokespeople of the turncoats and waverers. Quoting Jean Jaures’ lofty denunciation of Georges Clemenceau, Aristide Briand, René Viviani, and others drifting to the right in France, he describes these renegades as demanding a “return ticket” from revolutionary socialism. In Russia, Gardenin said, the *Vekhi* authors were “the ideologues, theoreticians and philosophers of the ‘return ticket’” (2). However, the real danger arose from the fact that they were not straightforward reactionaries. Quoting the witticism of the time that Struve was “the John the Baptist of all our rebirths,” Gardenin pointed out that Struve was not antisemitic, like the traditional reactionaries, but was “a-Semitic”: reactionaries wanted to restore the iron gauntlet, Struve wanted to strengthen the state system; reactionaries praised the idea of personal success, Struve supported the suitability (*godnost’*) of individuals; reactionaries roundly cursed the intelligentsia, Struve called on it to engage in self-denunciation and repentance (3). Chernov made much of the fact that the *Vekhi* authors themselves were, at heart, *intelligently*, and had come through a typical intelligentsia formation, though they claimed to be outside it. Berdiaev, for instance, could be said to have once shared the primitive attitude to philosophy he denounced in others. They were, Chernov said, “inhabitants of Sodom but not Sodomites; *intelligently* but alien to the intelligentsia; white, snow-white crows in a generally black flock” (10). The current period, Chernov continued, was one of revolutionary defeat and counter-revolutionary triumph. In an analysis many might see as having resonance today, Chernov pointed out that when the historical tide was ebbing, people ceased struggling for revolution and struggled off to wherever they could go. One turned to personal life, another into pure scholarship, a third into a caring profession, a fourth

into eroticism;¹⁹ a fifth, perhaps, may have entered into the auditorium of Struve and Gershenzon. But continued executions and exile meant that many would turn to renewed revolutionary activity (30). The *Vekhi* authors continually asked who was to blame for the failure of 1905, and constantly replied “the intelligentsia.” Chernov refused absolutely to accept this. In any case, he argued, the so-called Octobrists, the liberals and their allies, were not people of 17 October but actually of 3 June.²⁰ *Vekhi* was a symbol of the general tragedy, or tragic comedy, of liberalism, of its illness, which he diagnosed as “complete impotence; senile degeneration of its substance, and its own distinctive kind of political arteriosclerosis” (35). *Vekhi* had no answer to the real needs of the time. It was not the intelligentsia which was doomed, it was the *Vekhi* authors. “They are doomed. They are cut off from the sharply greening stems of the liberation movement and there is no way back for them” (37). The other contributions to the collection were no less uncompromising. Under the name Iur’ev, Chernov defended “scientific philosophy” against “philosophising mysticism,” claiming that *Vekhi* did not even remain true to Solov’ev. Instead, it came close to the old world of official religion. For instance, Solov’ev celebrated the Russian people as “fools in Christ,” while Berdiaev and Frank simply denounced them as “Ivan-durak” (98–99). Their philosophizing was simply a cloak under which they smuggled socio-political contraband (101)—implicitly identified by Chernov as a restoration of the values of official Russia, namely Autocracy, Orthodoxy, and Nationality. Nikolai Avksent’ev energetically defended the record of socialism and the intelligentsia in terms of creating cultural values. Socialism, in particular, would establish the emancipation of the laboring classes, which was the only real base for the flourishing of human creativity (128). The *Vekhi* authors in general and Frank in particular did not understand that, for the intelligentsia, revolution was not a value but a condition. Socialism had various aims to establish new economic and other institutions in the real world, but “it does not see, does not know any concrete path to the realization of its demands other than through a revolutionary collision with the old order” (139). Nor did socialism assume that human nature was intrinsically good. Socialism, in its desire for the external transformation of institutions, also recognised the necessity of inner development of the personality (140). Frank and the others

concentrated on the negative aspects of revolution without recognizing its potential for growth and renewal: “They hear only the rumblings of the collapse of the old edifice,” but see nothing of its replacement and thereby “understand nothing” (141). Rather cheekily, Avksent’ev concluded by saying that Christ was the son of a poor carpenter who brought in a new teaching but died in ignominy, which is a proof for his pharisaic critics that his teachings were false, when in fact they were resurrected by numerous followers and became the basis for a universal religion. “Our” intelligentsia “now finds itself in the same position” (144). A final noteworthy response came from Leonid Shishko, in one of his last writings. Shishko attempted to refute the picture painted, especially by Struve, of the relationship between the intelligentsia and the inert, passive masses. Instead, Shishko argued, the previous half-century had seen the gradual rapprochement of two great historical forces—the social movement of the masses and the intelligentsia movement. From early naive encounters of the 1870s populism had learned that it would take longer than expected to achieve its aims, and it had been steadily attaining them, as time passed, though there had been many perturbations and problems. The events of 1905 certainly caused a serious setback, but it was not, as *Vekhi* assumed, “a complete and irremediable catastrophe” (278) which would destroy the process altogether. In fact, it was “the hopes which flared up in the light of October 17” which were proven to be fantasy “and ... have been destroyed, leaving the remnants of deep disillusion in many hearts” (278).

PALPABLE HITS?

The response to *Vekhi* shows many things. Specific criticisms pointed out inconsistencies, contradictions, and perceived errors. For instance, several critics as diverse as Miliukov, Kizevetter, Chernov, and Lenin believed that the intelligentsia should be some kind of vanguard, or part of a vanguard, which educated and led the masses. It was not a weakness but a strength that the intelligentsia should be cut off from the benighted masses and should promote the interests of ordinary people above its own. Differences of emphasis in *Vekhi* between Berdiaev, Bulgakov, Gershenzon, and Struve over the role of the individual and the social in both the diagnosis of

the supposed ills of the intelligentsia and over the suggested cures were noted. Many specific points of disagreement emerged. However, above and beyond the individual points, some significant broader features can also be detected.

While at one level it is not surprising that hardly any of the defenders would admit to any serious failings in the intelligentsia, or to its bearing even partial responsibility for the collapse of the 1905 revolution, on another level it is somewhat disturbing. In fact, one of the main features of the debate is the strength and energy which the whole spectrum of the radical intelligentsia, from liberals to social democrats, put into the defense not only of the current intelligentsia but also of its revolutionary tradition. This also highlights the fact that, although we may translate deeply meaningful words like “liberal,” “democratic,” “populist,” and so on from one language to another, the cultural framework around the terms, and their inner content, can engage in subtle and not-so-subtle shifts of meaning. All of them shared a more radical and even revolutionary meaning than is often associated with them in the United States or Western Europe. However, another key feature of the debate, about which the defenders of the intelligentsia were somewhat more divided, was the question of whether or not *Vekhi* was a sign of the growing transition of the intelligentsia from a radical, questioning group which challenged the autocracy into a more compliant and collaborative middle class hiding behind, as Gershenzon put it, the “bayonets and prisons” of the regime. Lenin was not the only one to be convinced that this was precisely what was happening. However, it is noteworthy that the portion of the intelligentsia most likely to be ripe for embourgeoisement, the liberal professionals of the Kadet party, was among the stoutest critics of *Vekhi*, vigorously defending the social and the individual.

Not all of *Vekhi*’s critics were in agreement with one another—far from it, in fact. Two of the most effective responders, Kizevetter and Lur’e, were exceptions in that they did agree that *Vekhi* had diagnosed some serious weaknesses in the intelligentsia. Even so, they still did not think *Vekhi* had gotten all of its criticisms right. *Vekhi*, they felt, exaggerated the degree to which the intelligentsia was intellectually superficial and neurotic. It should praise rather than denigrate the intelligentsia’s devotion to the interests of

the *narod*, the people, the masses. Even more emphatically, however, they had no sympathy at all for *Vekhi*'s solutions. Kizevetter and Lur'e did not believe that the answer lay in mysticism, romanticism, inner development, and collaboration with the regime, as the *Vekhi* authors variously suggested, but in redoubling efforts to spread rationality and social engagement, not restrict them. They were also somewhat incredulous that *Vekhi* should be seriously suggesting a return to religion. For Lur'e particularly this was incomprehensible. It was not only the two of them who detected the "clink of the censer" in *Vekhi*. Almost all of *Vekhi*'s critics were of the same mind on this topic. Remarkably, perhaps, Miliukov was so contemptuous of the book's religious dimension that he did not even deem it worth refuting.

Finally, and this may be a point shared with many intellectual traditions, the debate showed that Russian intellectual life since the mid-nineteenth century was not a set of different "generations" which "succeeded" one another, but was rather a kind of palimpsest, or better, "layer-cake," with each segment adding to, rather than replacing, what had gone before. The debate showed not only a widespread devotion to a diverse set of revolutionary predecessors—Belinskii, Herzen, Chernyshevskii, Mikhailovskii, and others—but an important foundation of a kind of populism, in the sense of "serving the people," shared by liberals and socialists. Indeed, this observation leads to a broader speculation. As we have seen, Shishko, who was coming to the end of a long and fruitful life lived in the light of radical principles, believed that the intelligentsia and the masses were coming ever closer together. The tone of the debate bore this out at least in part. However, it was to be one of the tragic ironies of the October revolution that it was precisely the "natural" populism and the "natural" collectivism, even socialism, that were to be obliterated from Russian culture.

A close examination of the responses to *Vekhi* shows that, in the words of Hamlet, the rapiers of its critics made numerous palpable hits. The uncritical admiration often shown by *Vekhi*'s modern admirers needs to take this into account; its opponents are not to be dismissed simply as a group of narrow-minded, philistine fanatics. Many of *Vekhi*'s admirers take it to be a lone voice criticizing an intelligentsia all too ready to succumb to the perceived evils of post-revolutionary communism—in the forefront of which they identify intellectual superficiality; a flawed view of human

nature; a contempt for the individual and a domineering view of the social; a crude utilitarianism; and a rejection of the rich cultural and artistic traditions of the past. The debate demonstrates the sophistication, complexity, and intellectual richness of the intelligentsia tradition. It shows that, while *Vekhi* did make many valid points and the intelligentsia was in some ways overly hostile, the final impression is one of passionate differences. The debate shows the traditional intelligentsia at its most developed, creative and diverse. The tragedy is not simply that it was destroyed by Bolshevik malevolence and fanaticism, but that the maelstrom of war and revolution made it almost impossible for it to have survived at all. In this sense, taking the range of the debate as a whole, the real significance is not in who “won” the argument. Rather, its significance lies in the fact that this debate is more or less the final exposition of the richness of late-nineteenth-century Russian intellectual life. It is the poignant swansong of a tragically doomed and much-missed group of talented, critical, and creative people.

NOTES

- 1 *Iz glubiny. Sbornik statei o russkoi revoliutsii* (Moscow/Petrograd, 1918; 2nd edition Paris: YMCA Press, 1967).
- 2 Those writing about *Vekhi* at this time included G. Überlander, *Die Vekhi-Diskussion (1909–1912)* (Cologne: Photostelle der Universität Köln, 1965); A. Kelly, “Attitudes to the Individual in Russian Thought and Literature with Special Reference to the *Vekhi* Controversy,” (D.Phil. diss., Oxford, 1970); S. R. Tompkins, “*Vekhi* and the Russian Intelligentsia,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 2 (1957): 11–25; and N. Poltoratzky, “The *Vekhi* Dispute and the Significance of *Vekhi*,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 9, no. 1 (1967): 86–106.
- 3 *Iz-pod glyb. Sbornik statei* (Moscow: Samizdat, 1974; Paris: YMCA Press, 1974).
- 4 V. V. Sapov, ed., “*Vekhi*”: *pro et contra. Antologiya* (St. Petersburg: Russkii Khristianskii gumanitarnyi institut, 1998).
- 5 D. S. Merezhkovskii, “Sem’ smirennnykh,” *Rech’*, 9 May 1909.
- 6 M. I. Gershenzon, “Preface,” *Vekhi: sbornik statei o russkoi intelligentsii* (Moscow : Tipografiia V. M. Sablina, 1909).

- 7 L. N. Tolstoi, "I Cannot be Silent," *New York Times*, 19 July 1908.
- 8 L. N. Andreev, *Pered zadachami vremeni* (Benson, VT: Chalidze Publications, 1985), 50.
- 9 R. Manning, *The Crisis of the Old Order in Russia: Gentry and Government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); L. Haimson, *Russia's Revolutionary Experience: Two Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
- 10 *Intelligentsiia v Rossii: sbornik statei* (St. Petersburg, 1910). Page references are given in parentheses in the text.
- 11 "O sbornike Vekhi," *Russkaia mysl'* 5 (May 1909). A. A. Kizevetter: 127–37 and S. Lur'e: 137–46. Page references are given in parentheses in the text.
- 12 G. Fischer, *Russian Liberalism: From Gentry to Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 63.
- 13 "Vekhi" *kak znamenie vremeni* (Moscow: Zveno, 1910), 20. Subsequent page references are given in parentheses in the text.
- 14 Machajski (1866–1926) (real name A. Vol'skii and known as Makhaev in Russian) was best known for a three-volume pamphlet entitled *Umstvennyi rabochii* (*The Mental Laborer*, Geneva, 1905) in which he argued that socialism was the ideology which represented the class interests of the intelligentsia rather than the workers, because it accorded them the role of technocratic elite.
- 15 V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Gospolizdat, 1958–65), vol.19, 168.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 See footnote 13 for details.
- 18 S. L. Frank, *Smysl zhizni* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1925), 97.
- 19 "Saninism," a reference to a scandalous novel of the time. M. Artsybashev, *Sanin* (St. Petersburg, 1906).
- 20 17 October was the date in 1905 on which the October Manifesto, a very limited proposal for reforms to be undertaken, was published over the signature of the tsar, mainly in order to divide and weaken the revolutionary movement of that year. 3 June was the day in 1907 when Prime Minister Stolypin dissolved the Second Duma and eventually replaced it with a Third Duma elected on a restrictive franchise.