

REVIEW OF RICHARD HARE,  
*PORTRAITS OF RUSSIAN PERSONALITIES  
BETWEEN REFORM AND REVOLUTION*

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THIS IS MR HARE'S second gallery of portraits of Russian personalities, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As in his earlier volume, *Pioneers of Russian Social Thought*, Mr Hare shows himself to be well read in important secondary sources, especially of the Soviet period, which are largely unfamiliar to English students of Russia. Mr Hare, a scholarly and occasionally dogmatic critic, writes, as always, clearly, succinctly and elegantly, with firm moral opinions about the character and activities of his subjects, which does not seek to conceal. His sympathies, much more clearly than in his earlier volume, are with the conservatives, or with those temperate liberals who came under attack from the left wing intellectuals and radical journalists of their day, and still more from official Soviet critics and literary historians of our own. In defence of this attitude it may be said that so much Russian literary, and indeed social, history, has been written by left wing doctrinaires, who are responsible for the now traditional division of all public figures into the virtuous socially progressive, utilitarian, materialistic sheep, and the wicked (or wrong-headed) reactionary, religious, aesthetic, unpolitical or otherwise uncommitted goats, that the temptation to give the pendulum a strong swing in the opposite direction can be very considerable. Mr Hare does not resist it. In his essay on Bakunin he writes on his anti-populism, his denunciations of 'official democracy and Red bureaucracy', his extraordinarily accurate prophecies about State socialism and on other seldom remarked and important elements in the ideas of that very unusual and very gifted man. But these points are made in strange isolation, with no account either of Bakunin's political and intellectual personality, or of the origins or content of his highly influential teaching. One gets the impression that Mr Hare looks on Bakunin and his opinions as an aberration from sanity, not worthy of serious analysis. So, too, his treatment

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of Dostoevsky, the Populists and Kropotkin suggests the point of view of sturdy English common sense to which these persons must seem a mere collection of outlandish exotics or muddle-headed amateurs. Even though one can well understand Mr Hare's acute distaste for the verbose, tedious, and often violently propagandist criticism of the radicals in which he has had to immerse himself, the resultant tendency to look upon nearly all the subjects of his vignettes as being at all times slightly ludicrous, and often grotesque, scarcely makes for sympathetic insight into their personalities or ideas. One of the few figures of which Mr Hare seems genuinely to approve is Pobedonostsev, of whom he says much that is interesting, but nothing to explain why, if his intentions were as excellent as Mr Hare argues, he should, nevertheless, have been so widely regarded (in Mr Hare's own words) 'as the high priest of black reaction, spreading his owl's wings over the Russian Empire'. Similarly his portrait of Witte leaves largely unexplained the causes of the ultimate failure of his political programme, which Mr Hare seems to attribute almost entirely to the sheer perversity or blindness unaccountably displayed by the parties of the centre and the left. He speaks favourably of Stolypin, to whose extraordinary capacities full justice has not been rendered yet. But here, too, the bitterness which he inspired in liberals by his ruthless repression of anti-autocratic forces, at a time when to most western observers the Russian regime seemed to be losing all moral and historical justification, is neither accounted nor allowed for. Yet the movement of opinion and the social evolution which culminated in the Revolution cannot be explained without some analysis of these facts.

Against this may be set Mr Hare's original and valuable discussion of Dostoevsky's anti-European – Asian – propensities, and the roots of his at times almost Fascist opinions, compounded of his admiration for German thoroughness, his contempt for France, his wild chauvinism and his messianic belief in Russia's mission to lead the world to salvation by uniting mankind in brotherly love – a prospect which may well have seemed to her would-be beneficiaries the crushing embrace of a boa constrictor. Here Mr Hare is at his best. His account of Turgenev is no less interesting, although he is a good deal harsher about Turgenev's left wing critics than Turgenev himself who, even while he protested against their barbarous ignorance and hatred of

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sensibility, nevertheless never ceased from anxious attempts to justify himself before the revolutionaries and even the terrorists, and preserved relations with them to the end of his life. The most interesting piece in the book is Mr Hare's essay on Tolstoy. It has many virtues, the principal amongst which is that it provides the English reader with something not easily found in his biographies – namely an accurate account of Tolstoy's social and political views before and after he wrote *War and Peace*. Mr Hare makes no attempt to synthesise them – he goes almost too far in his avoidance of generalisations – but in this case his method is highly rewarding, for the contradictions of which Tolstoy was made speak most effectively for themselves. Yet here, too, much is left to the reader's own resources: no hypotheses are advanced to account for Tolstoy's clear preference for such out and out reactionaries as Katkov or Strakhov as compared with Turgenev and his friends; nor for the fact that his morality (for instance in *Anna Karenina*) is so sternly conventional in contrast to that of Turgenev or Dostoevsky; nor, again, for the relation between Tolstoy's aesthetic views and his actual tastes in music, literature and painting. Mr Hare's essays touch upon these fascinating questions, but leave them undiscussed; yet his learning, sensibility and interest make him uniquely qualified to answer them to the lasting benefit of English readers.

The sketches of Nikitenko, a censor and minor man of letters, whose journal has hitherto been translated only into German, of Mikhailovsky, Solovev, Rozanov, Lavrov, Tikhomirov and the mysterious Fedorov are very much slighter, but serve to preserve for the eye of the common reader the images of half a dozen original personalities, at least three of them writers of unique gifts with moments of genius. The Soviet Union buried those men perhaps for fear that their voices might have a disturbing effect even after half a century. Mr Hare has performed a service in exhuming them and reconstructing their features, which are all but unknown to the general public of the West.

There are a good many misprints and slips, e.g. on pages 75, 127 (where the same name is spelt in two different fashions on the same page), 138, 146, 222, and some peculiar lapses (e.g. on p. 74 the name of one of the most celebrated characters in Russian fiction is strangely altered) and on pages 104, 204, 251; I list these for the benefit of the next edition of this uneven, opinionated, but stimulating, learned, and much needed book.

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*English Historical Review* 75 (1960), 500–2  
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**Posted 19 February 2004**