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1925 — 1934

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terrain for the struggle against the real and immediate obstacle, the struggle for political and social emancipation.

But it did not itself undertake that struggle. It did not even pose the question: what is to be done to genuinely liberate the individual? It remained, to the end, in the domain of purely ideological discussions and purely moral accomplishments. That other question, — which is to say, the problem of real action, of a practical struggle for emancipation, — was posed by the following generation, in the years 1870–80. It was then that the first revolutionary and socialist parties were formed in Russia. The real action commenced. But it no longer had anything in common with the old "nihilism" of the past. And the word itself remained, in the Russian language, as a purely historical terms, the trace of a movement of ideas in the years 1860–70.

The fact that those in foreign countries have the habit of understanding by "nihilism" the entire Russian revolutionary movement prior to bolshevism, and speak of a "nihilist party," is only a historical error due to the ignorance of the true history of the revolutionary movements in Russia.

NIHILISM n. m. (from Latin *nihil*, nothing)

A deeply rooted and widely spread misunderstanding is closely linked to this word born, 75 years ago, in the Russian literature and passed without being translated (thanks to its Latin origin), into other languages.

In France, in Germany, in England and elsewhere, one usually understands by "nihilism" a current of ideas — or even a system — revolutionary and social politics, invented in Russia, having there (or having had) numerous organized partisans. We routinely speak of a "nihilist party" and of "the nihilists," its members. All this is false. It is time to correct that error, at least for the readers of the Anarchist Encyclopedia.

The term nihilism has been introduced into the Russian literature — and thus into the language — by the famous novelist Ivan Turgenev (1818–1883), towards the middle of the last century. In one of his novels, notably, Turgenev described in this way a current of ideas that had arisen among Russian intellectuals in the late 1850s. The word was a success and rapidly entered into circulation.

This current of ideas had above all a philosophical and moral character. Its field of influence always remained very small, having never extended beyond the intellectual stratum. Its style was always personal and peaceful, but that did not prevent it, however, from being very lively, imbued with a great breath of individual revolt and guided by a dream of happiness for all mankind. The movement it had provoked, contented itself with the literary domain and especially that of morals. But in these two areas, the movement did not shrink before the last logical conclusions, that it not only formulated, but sought to apply individually, as a rule of conduct.

Within these limits, the movement opened the way to a very progressive and independent moral and intellectual evolution: an evolution that, for example, brought the entire Russian intellectual youth to extremely advanced general concepts and resulted in, among others things, the emancipation of cultured women, of which the Russia of the late nineteenth century could rightly be proud. It is necessary to add that this current of ideas, while being strictly moral and individual, was nevertheless in itself, thanks to its largely human and emancipatory spirit, the seed of future social ideas: conceptions

that succeeded it and later resulted in a vast political and social action, with which, precisely, this school of thought is confused today outside of Russia. Indirectly, "nihilism" prepared the terrain for the movements and political organizations of a markedly social and revolutionary sort, that appeared later under the influence of ideas prevalent in Europe and of external and internal events. The misunderstanding is, precisely, in that we confuse, under the name of "nihilism", the revolutionary movement later led and represented by organized groups or parties having an agenda and a purpose, with a single stream of ideas which preceded and to which alone the word "nihilism" should be attributed.

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As a philosophical and moral conception, nihilism had for bases: on the one hand, materialism, and, on the other hand, individualism, both pushed to the extremes.

Force and Matter, the famous work of Büchner (German materialist philosopher, 1824–1899) appeared in that era, was translated into Russian, lithographed clandestinely and distributed, despite the risks, with a very great success, in thousands of copies. That book became the veritable gospel of the young Russian intellectuals from then on. The works of Moleschott, Ch. Darwin and several other foreign naturalists and materialists, exercised and equally great influence. Materialism was accepted as an incontestable, absolute truth.

As materialists, the "nihilists" waged a relentless war against religion and against everything that was beyond pure, positive reason; against everything found to be outside material and immediately useful reality; against everything that belonged to the spiritual, sentimental, idealist domain. They despised beauty, the aesthetic, sentimental love, the art of dressing, of pleasing, etc . . . In this vein, they went so far as to completely disown art as an expression of idealism. Their great ideologist, the brilliant publicist Pisarev (who died accidentally in his youth), launched, in one of his articles, his famous example, saying that a simple shoemaker was infinitely more to be esteemed and admired than Raphael, because the first produced material and useful objects, while the works of the second served

no purpose. The same Pisarev tried desperately, in his writings, to dethrone, from the materialist and utilitarian point of view, the great poet Pushkin. "Nature is not a temple, but a laboratory, and man is there to work," said the nihilist Bazarov in the novel of Turgenev. (In speaking of a "fierce war" waged by the nihilists, we must understand by this a literary and verbal "war," and nothing more. For, as I already said, "nihilism" limited its activity to the propaganda of its ideas in a few reviews and some intellectual circles. This propaganda was already difficult enough, for it had to reckon with the tsarist censorship and police that cracked down on "foreign heresies" and every independent thought).

But the true basis of "nihilism" was a sort of characteristic individualism. Risen, first, as a normal reaction against all that, especially in Russia, crush free and individual thought, its bearer, this individualism ended by renouncing, in the name of an absolute individual liberty, all the constraints, all the shackles, obligations and traditions imposed on individuals by the family, society, customs, mores, beliefs, etc . . . Complete emancipation of the individual, man or woman, from all that could attack its independence or the liberty of its thought: such was the fundamental idea of "nihilism." It defended the sacred right of the individual to complete liberty, and the inviolable privacy of existence

The reader will easily understand why this current of ideas has been called "nihilism." We mean by this that the partisans of that ideology admit nothing (nihil) of that which was natural and sacred for others (family, society, religion, art, traditions, etc . . .) To the question that one posed to such a man: — what do you accept, what do you approve of all that is around you and claims to have the right or even the obligation to exert over you some influence? — The man responded: nothing — "nihil." He was thus a "nihilist."

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Despite its essentially individual, philosophical and moral character (let us not forget that it defended individual liberty, equally, in an abstract, philosophical and moral fashion, and not against concrete political or social despotism), nihilism, as I have said, prepared the