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The Impossibility of Conservatism? Insights from Russian History

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that both the normative worth and practicality of conservatism depend on how much there is to enjoy and value in actual historical circumstances. I use examples from Russian history in the Tsarist period to show that if they live in times of great hardship, or under arbitrary political rule, political actors and thinkers with conservative sympathies (such as respect for tradition, and predilection for slow, gradual improvements) will face painful moral dilemmas, and perhaps even be justified in renouncing conservative behaviors altogether. For this reason, the Russian example helps us to better understand why being conservative can sometimes be impossible.

Sometimes [...] revolution is necessary in order to achieve piecemeal change. Equally, a project can be utopian when its advocates believe it can be achieved incrementally. Debates about gradual improvement or total transformation are just a distraction. The question is whether the goals of the project are possible at all [...].
—Gray (2011)

Just imagine that a British Labour Party supporter and a Conservative Party supporter met each other by chance in a weird, wild country like Russia. What would they do? They'd go to the pub or for a cup of tea together.
—Solidarity movement activist cited in White (2013)

In his essay “On Being Conservative” (1956), philosopher Michael Oakeshott describes a conservative “disposition,” as centered on “a propensity to use and to enjoy what is available” and “to delight in what is present rather than what was or what may be” (407–408). The present, as Oakeshott portrays it, is to be esteemed on account of its familiarity, its here-and-now quality, and its ability to provide sufficient (rather than superabundant or blissful) conditions for life. Yet Oakeshott acknowledges that the value of the present—and, ultimately, of conservatism itself—depends on the concrete, historical circumstances in which any political actor finds

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himself or herself.¹ He goes on to add that the conservative approach to politics characteristically asserts itself “when there is much to be enjoyed, and it will be strongest when this is combined with evident risk of loss” (408). And he observes that if the present is “arid, offering little or nothing to be used or enjoyed, then [the conservative] inclination will be weak or absent” (408).

These remarks, by one of conservatism’s best-known thinkers, point to an important aspect of conservative theory, namely that both the normative worth and practicality of a conservative outlook depend on how much there is to enjoy and value in actual historical circumstances. If they live in times of great hardship, or under arbitrary political rule, political actors and thinkers with conservative sympathies (such as respect for tradition, and predilection for slow, gradual improvements) will face painful moral dilemmas, and perhaps even be justified in renouncing conservative behaviors altogether. Such thinkers have been called “radical conservatives” or, sometimes, “revolutionary conservatives” because of their recourse to radical means to defend values such as stability, tradition, and authority (see for example, [Dahl 1999](#); [Muller 1987](#)). Oakeshott himself intimates that, in historically turbulent times, the task of conservatively-inclined thinkers is no longer delighting in the present, but actively participating in the establishment of a better future. And he concludes, rather enigmatically, “that it is not at all inconsistent to be conservative in respect of government and radical in respect of almost every other activity” (1956, 435).

This paper explores some of the issues that thinkers temperamentally disposed to conservatism face when they live in a time and place in which laws and constitutions are dispensed with, and there is little of value to conserve. It proceeds by discussing, first, the necessary preconditions for a recognizably conservative approach to change, before going on to explore what might happen if those preconditions do not exist. While the conservative mistrust of revolution and preference for piecemeal approaches is well-known, less attention has been paid to the plight of (potentially) revolutionary conservatives, who are convinced that such approaches are of little or no use in their current circumstances. Part two of this essay, therefore, uses empirical examples to illustrate how practice complicates some of the theoretical propositions discussed in part one. While Edmund Burke’s (1729–1797) reactions to the French Revolution have played a liminal role in developing conservative political philosophy, other parts of history where conservatism’s problems have emerged and have a recognizable connection with the situation today remain of great interest. In particular, the decades before the Russian Revolution of 1917 illustrate particularly well the insoluble dilemma of those who seek to preach moderation and the role of tradition in turbulent historical circumstances. For this reason, the Russian example helps us to better understand why being conservative can sometimes be impossible.

THE PRECONDITIONS FOR CONSERVATISM

Conservatism’s opposition to the idea of radical change is well known and, as a result, that ideology has sometimes been portrayed as one whose concerns are primarily procedural and methodological, rather than substantive. Anthony Quinton, for example, observes that conservatism “prescribes no principles or ideals or institutions universally” (2007, 288). The desirability of specific institutions for the conservative,

then, is “relative to the circumstances of a particular time and place, one in which they are historically established” (288). Yet it would be disingenuous to describe conservatism as committed to maintaining any existing institutions at all; support for an oppressive, authoritarian government would be more accurately described as another species of right-wing ideology (such as authoritarianism or fascism), rather than conservatism proper. Indeed, the historical present conservatives value is a thoroughly modern one, organized (as in the case of a liberal regime) around the separation between public and private life, and properly applied laws.² Moreover, conservatism as a distinct mode of thought can be characterized as “a product of the Enlightenment” in that its main representatives consistently use reason (as opposed to, for example, traditional religious arguments concerning the quest for ultimate salvation) to deny that reason should hold an exalted place in human affairs (Muller 1997, 5).

The types of institutions that philosophical conservatives value derive from an epistemological premise conservatives share, namely that we have great difficulty “acquiring, understanding and using knowledge about the world” (O’Hara 2011, 24). Burke observed in 1790 that human beings are, by and large, incapable of sufficiently comprehending the full value and impact of social and political institutions and processes, because the “private stock of reason” in each individual is small; much more promising is the “general bank and capital of nations and ages” (1790, 84). Building on this insight, conservatives have consistently pointed to the limitations of what any one individual or state can hope to achieve, and argued that uncertainty and complexity are characteristics of life, not problems that one can hope to resolve.

This skepticism in the powers of individual reason and acceptance of imperfection explains traditional conservative mistrust of large-scale programs for social reform, and preferences for a limited style of politics. Noël O’Sullivan describes this style as one that has as its primary aim the preservation of the distinction between state and society (1976, 12); and this distinction is perfectly compatible with the traditional conservative emphasis on the role that other motivations than reason—including love, trusteeship, and friendship—play in human behavior. What Roger Scruton has called the conservative emphasis on “small-scale, observable and believable human motives” is designed to contribute to a picture of a rich and varied life that occurs outside of the spheres in which the state is legitimately allowed to exercise its rationalizing power (2006, 11).

In addition to a limited political style, traditional conservative engagement with the idea of imperfect humans and imperfect knowledge underpins the role played in that ideology by the rule of law. The widespread adherence to a well-understood body of law is, in Kieron O’Hara’s words, able to “provide some predictability and stability to aid people in making plans and undertaking investment in the future with some confidence” (2011, 116). In its ideal form, law is the outcome of manifold amendments and adjustments over time, and thus represents the preferences of a substantial proportion of the population (rather than those of a ruler or an elite group). The constitution holds a particular place of honor for the conservative as the repository of the impersonal, collective wisdom that the rule of law is thought to embody. In this view, law is a paramount example of a social good that has accumulated

slowly over time, what Quinton refers to as “the politically authorized part of custom” (2007, 300).

Thus conservatism, as we use the term in Western political philosophy, wishes to encourage a limited style of politics and to further the rule of law, while steadfastly opposing the idea of total or radical change. In turn, this desire for “safe” forms of change is linked to conserving already existing value (see for example, [Freeden 1996](#), 332; [O’Hara 2011](#), 17; [Beckstein 2013](#)). “A state without the means of some change,” Edmund Burke wrote, “is without the means of its conservation” (1790, 19–20; see also [Huntington 1957](#), 455). For understandable reasons, growth has proved a favorite trope of philosophical conservatives to describe desirable forms of change that occur both gradually and naturally, and therefore preserve elements of the past ([Scruton 1980](#), 22; [Oakeshott 1983](#), 98). From this perspective, the success of any specific form of change depends on reaching a balance between a dynamic factor such as individual enterprise, that brings “into the world good things which are new,” and values such as stability and continuity, which enable “us to preserve them when brought in” ([Hogg 1948](#), 85; see also [Hampsher-Monk 2012](#), 205). In keeping with an organic view of human history, institutions and practices can themselves be portrayed as evolving responses by a community and its leaders to specific social, political, and economic problems (see for example, [Quinton 2007](#), 286). Thus Quintin Hogg summarizes the conservative understanding of desirable change as not “some impersonal law of nature, nor yet a matter of coincidence [. . .], but the sum of an infinite number of tiny impulses created by the individual efforts of innumerable men and women” (1948, 89).

It is clear that trying to derive a plan of action from an abstract commitment to a safe, organic form of change leaves much room for interpretation, and what constitutes “reform” for conservatively-inclined thinkers will vary in different situations. As Noël O’Sullivan has observed, at times conservatives might act in a purely defensive fashion, but at other times may find themselves taking the initiative in order to bring about changes they consider to be safe. Thus conservatives may be found defending authority; in other instances they might find themselves supporting the cause of liberty against overly paternalistic governments (1976, 12). These observations are in line with what is often described as the inherent pragmatism of a conservative approach to politics (see for example, [Kekes 1997](#), 212–13). Yet the courses of action that conservatives take are bound up with the possibilities available within a given political order. As I have attempted to show, conservatism makes normative claims regarding what is of value in the historical present and prioritizes the liberal separation between public and private life; we must add to Roger Scruton’s claim that conservatism is “inherently local” (2006, 9) by acknowledging that it is tributary to a universal (and “inherently liberal”) core. And as soon as conservative sympathizers find themselves in an atmosphere lacking a limited style of government and the rule of law, and when there is little hope for slow, gradual change, their favored modes of conduct are tested, and they face a troubling predicament from which theory offers no easy escape.

While conservative theory has largely remained silent on what concrete actions are commendable when the political status quo is itself untenable, observers have

pointed out that conservative arguments against change reflect several distinct motivations. Albert Hirschman, for instance, differentiates between three rhetorical strategies, what he calls the perversity thesis, the futility thesis, and the jeopardy thesis (1991). While these rhetorical postures crop up repeatedly in conservative thought, they also reflect a broader emphasis on the imperfectible nature of human beings, and the fact that preferred forms of change exist alongside what Hogg characterizes as “notable setbacks, frequent disappointments and some complete breakdowns.” Progress, in this view remains “fragile and precarious,” and any achievements made can be admired, but should not be considered irreversible (1948, 84–85). Armed with these insights, the subtlest conservative sympathizers are, from the outset, attuned to the potential futility of any course of action they might choose.

CONSERVATIVE IDEOLOGY IN PRACTICE: SOME RUSSIAN EXAMPLES

Conservative arguments that large-scale change is inherently distressing and can produce a number of unplanned consequences are often reinforced by specific examples. The experience of revolution, in Quinton’s words, confirms the intuition of conservatives that “changes designed to augment the realization of any one [contestable and plural end] are likely to undermine the realization of others” (2007, 296). As previously stated, while the French Revolution played a liminal role in developing conservative ideas about change, the Russian Revolution is often cited as further proof that attempts to improve humanity are futile.³ Despite this, the Russian contribution to conservative ideology has been rarely discussed. And yet, the years leading up to the Russian Revolution illustrate particularly well how conservatively-inclined thinkers, caught between an oppressive, autocratic state and an intolerant revolutionary movement, were forced into continual contradiction with themselves.

Attempting to translate political categories into different cultural and historical contexts is problematic; this seems to be compounded in the case of conservatism, which emphasizes “historical loyalties [and] local identities” (Scruton 2006, 9). In the context of prerevolutionary Russia, it is particularly important to differentiate between those who held a recognizably conservative attitude to change, and those who simply defended the authoritarianism of an absolute monarch.⁴ Jerry Z. Muller distinguishes between conservatism, on the one hand, and orthodoxy, on the other, whereby orthodoxy defends existing institutions and practices because of their inherent truth, while conservatives do so for a variety of reasons, including the presumption that they have served some useful function, or fear that their elimination may result in harmful consequences (1997, 3–31). It is this conservative attitude, as well as an engagement with (rather than wholesale rejection of) rational argumentation, that is relevant for how both Muller and I label any thinker a conservative.

Thus for the purposes of this essay, conservatism in the decades leading up to the Revolution of 1917 did not mean support for unalloyed royal absolutism, but rather—as intimated above—an organic approach to society that values continuity and tradition, and that nevertheless sought to further the rule of law by engaging in limited, incremental reforms to existing institutions. A number of factors including

Russia's immense terrain, the inherent vulnerability of its open borders, the diversity of the populations within them, and the uneducated nature of its population led political actors to adopt positions that differed in important ways from their European counterparts. Broadly speaking, both Russian thinkers with liberal and conservative sympathies subscribed to the view that a strong, centralized government was necessary given their country's situation.

In the course of the nineteenth century, many Russian thinkers who sympathized profoundly with conservative principles, and abhorred the idea of dramatic changes to their country's situation, reluctantly came to believe that a thoroughgoing transformation of the existing order was a necessary precondition for its continued existence. Within the reign of the most absolutist regime of nineteenth-century European powers, calls for slow, limited reforms within the existing system could be construed as support for despotism; simultaneously, the Tsarist state reacted to various reform proposals as if they constituted a threat to the regime's very survival. The attempt to combine elementary forms of civil rights with an unlimited monarchy proved unrealistic; the last Tsar Nicholas II (reigned 1894–1917) began his tenure by dismissing constitutional liberties as “senseless dreams” (*bessmyslennye mechtaniia*).⁵ As documented below, since the existing regime was unwilling to entertain even the possibility of reforms in the direction of a rule-of-law state, the distinction between devoted conservatives, liberals, and uncompromising revolutionaries became significantly blurred.

The diaries of Aleksandr Nikitenko (1804–1877), written over the course of 50 years (1826 to 1877) provide a rich source of materials documenting the predicament of those who advocated moderation and cautious reform in nineteenth-century Russia.⁶ Nikitenko was born a serf in 1804 but, unusually for the period, was able to gain his freedom at an early age, and went on to have a successful career as an academic, literary critic, and an active member of numerous governmental committees and commissions; indeed, he has been described as someone who spent most of his adult life “in the very midst of [Russia's] literary, political and social scene” (Nikitenko 1975, xi). As a former serf who held high office in the government of Tsarist Russia, Nikitenko was well aware of the extent to which the existing system institutionalized arbitrary behavior (what Russians refer to as *proizvol*) in government and society.⁷ And yet, he rejected the idea of total or radical change because he mistrusted the a priori reasoning and revolutionary optimism on which such comments relied (see for example, Hare 1959, 1–16).

By all scholarly accounts, Nikitenko was a “very conservative liberal” (Kelly 1998, 121).⁸ Like other reformists, he sympathized with the administrative and legal reforms enacted by Tsar Alexander II (reigned 1855–81) in the early 1860s designed to establish elements of a lawful state and to emancipate the serfs.⁹ While informed Russians such as Nikitenko hated the old system, a significant portion of them were skeptical of an immediate transition to constitutionalism, and argued instead that reforms should be widened and limitations on autocratic power introduced within the existing legal framework. Nikitenko's sympathies under a reforming Tsar thus fit well with what another Russian thinker, Vasilii Maklakov (1869–1957), referred to in his

memoirs as the “tradition of the 1860s,” aimed at furthering “cooperation between the state [*vlast'*] and society” (1936 vol. 2, 295).

Nikitenko’s conservatism is clearly visible in his condemnation of what he saw as doctrinaire calls for radical change on the part of the Left, which he felt would “produce chaos and nothing more,” and he exhorted Russian radicals to do no more than campaign against existing abuses within the imperial system (1975, 196). His conservative sympathies are also apparent in his denunciations of the “despotism” of “extremist liberals” who favored an “abstract” freedom rather than one “which history has produced, which no one has imposed upon a people, which has not emerged as an abstract doctrine but as the fruit of genuine toil and genuine inspiration” (176). Nikitenko summarized his own views about change when he wrote: “I have little faith in those doctrines which promise society infinite happiness and perfection, but I do believe in mankind’s need to develop. At every stage of this development there emerges for mankind certain blessings along with an unavoidable admixture of certain evils” (167). Believing it impossible to destroy new ideas, “turn things back, or maintain the status quo” for all eternity, Nikitenko repeatedly called for “time and gradual progress to do their work” (210, 217), and emphasized the importance of preserving history and culture. Diary entries in the early 1860s testify to his belief that Tsar Alexander II was an honest and patriotic man, engaged in commendable attempts to tinker with the existing system; “[t]he old,” Nikitenko wrote in 1861, “is the totality from which emerges the new” (238, 254).

Yet even as the government embarked on the “Great Reforms” that went a significant way towards transforming Russia, it increasingly tried to restrict and limit the effectiveness of the changes, and played on the threat of revolution to recast even minimal suggestions for further reform as subversive. The entries in Nikitenko’s diaries reflect his shifting attitude towards the government’s desire and capacity for reform. Nikitenko always advocated resisting “intelligently and firmly” the “revolutionary fever” spreading through the empire, but lamented that, in such trying times, power lay “in the hands of unreliable people” (235). While he recorded his personal admiration for the Tsar’s attempts at reform, he acknowledged that he hated “all forms of despotism equally” (254), and that Alexander II could not transform Russia alone. He implored the government not to “ignore certain demands of the educated sector of society” and to “act more judiciously and with greater deference to the law” (235). And Nikitenko observed that the imperial regime’s “most dangerous internal enemies” were not Polish nationalists or socialist revolutionaries, but rather “those government figures” who create such revolutionaries by “dissolving the *zemstvos* [local self-government structures] and undermining the courts” (323).

In turn, the Tsarist regime saw little difference between the tactics Nikitenko advocated and those of radical socialists, willing to resort to violence in the hopes of overthrowing the regime. Nikitenko asked rhetorically in his diaries “why must we label everything revolution, including *zemstvos* and court reforms? Are they not a necessity?” (324). In fact, he implicitly conceded in his diaries that his vision of historical transformation was impossible to defend under the circumstances; the government’s bad faith and lack of sincerity were sufficient to turn a moderate and devoted civil servant such as him into a revolutionary. Writing in 1869 Nikitenko

foresaw a “radical reform of all civilization and culture” that should not be resisted, and mused that there may be some truth to the socialist reaction to despotism: “perhaps we shall have to be cleansed in fire and revolution” (335).

By the end of the nineteenth century, an increasing number of thinkers and political actors with similar premises to Nikitenko’s had reached similar conclusions. While they shared his conservative sympathies, and detested violence and atheistic, socialist morality, they were begrudgingly forced to concede that the current state of affairs was worthy of contempt. The special circumstances of tsarist oppression—the reign of Tsar Alexander III (1881–94) and that of Nicholas II until the Revolution of 1905 (1894–1905) has been described as “a period of continuous reaction” (Riasanovsky 1984, 391)—blurred the distinction between democratically-inclined members of the landed gentry and those who actively favored a revolution. Government insensitivity towards reformist appeals, and the conviction that the autocracy was embarked on a disastrous set of policies that would merely stimulate revolutionary ferment (government policies were perceived as responsible for the famine of 1895, the war with Japan that began in 1904, as well as the most noxious aspects of capitalist development) all served to encourage members of Russian society to engage in political action. Throughout the 1890s, government infringement of professional autonomy encouraged a number of professors, lawyers, writers, doctors, and engineers to engage with the problem of political reform, while the *zemstvo* institutions of local self-government acted as a forum for the development of oppositional attitudes among the landed gentry (Mackenzie 1982 and Manning 1982). Government policy at the time was, as one historian observed, tantamount to a declaration of “war on the moderate elements in Russian society” (Pipes 2005, 167).

In these circumstances, disparate individuals were united by their belief that the autocratic system could be improved, and that participating in its transformation was both morally necessary and safer than leaving it to hardcore revolutionary groups. In the years leading up to 1905, conservatively inclined thinkers—men such as Pëtr Struve (1870–1944), Pavel Novgorodtsev (1866–1924), Semën Frank (1877–1950) and Sergei Kotliarevskii (1873–1941)—temporarily united with others from varied backgrounds in a rough consensus that the autocracy should be reformed through peaceful means, and that a representative, rule-of-law regime was its most desirable replacement.¹⁰ The Russian Revolution of 1905 was a direct product of what has been called “a kind of war coalition of diverse groups, monarchists and republicans, liberals and socialists” who temporarily came together in the hope that they could further constitutional reform and the rule of law (Tyrkova-Williams 1953, 173).¹¹ A well-known public figure who went on to become one of Russia’s foremost conservative philosophers, Pëtr Struve, wrote in 1902: “[we] must recognize that when it comes to national liberation, both the revolutionary struggle and peaceful and moderate opposition cannot do without one another” (104–105).

The experience of the Revolution of 1905 marked Russia’s political elite profoundly. Both liberals and conservatives had been instrumental in bringing about the country’s nominal transformation into a constitutional monarchy, but the victory of a lawful system in Russia was short-lived, and autocratic power structures quickly reasserted themselves.¹² Roughly speaking, if prior to 1905 those who intuitively

favored conservative forms of change had been temporarily converted to revolutionary optimism, the feeling in the Revolution's aftermath was one of profound malaise. In particular, the views of a number of thinkers who had been intimately involved in elaborating a legal philosophy applicable to Russia now distanced themselves from an optimistic theory of historical change, in favor of a much more nuanced view that bears a substantial debt to conservative philosophy. The result was a sustained reflection on the merits of a conservative approach to change from precisely those thinkers who had been temporarily involved in revolutionary activities.

In the revolution's aftermath, men such as Struve, Kotliarevskii, and others mounted a sophisticated critique of the idea of revolution and of liberal philosophies of progress, directed at the Russian intelligentsia as a whole and members of the Constitutional-Democratic (Kadet) party in particular, with which they had cooperated closely. In 1902 the future head of the Kadet Party, Pavel Miliukov (1859–1943), had described the advent of a rule-of-law system in Russia as both desirable and inevitable: “the free forms of political life as such are no more national than use of the alphabet or the printing press, steam or electricity,” he wrote. “They become inevitable when social life has become so complex that it can no longer be accommodated within the framework of a more primitive order” (1902, 37–38). In a series of articles and monographs published in the decade preceding the Revolution of 1917, Struve and his colleagues sought to draw on their own experience of revolution to highlight the dangerous implications of such assumptions, and how they threatened the vulnerable fabric of society itself.¹³

In various ways, these men all argued that when attempting to pass from one system to another, changes to political institutions are not enough; instead these changes must be accompanied by a broader concern for cultural renewal and the creation of a stable political culture. Democracy, Kotliarevskii wrote, is one form of collective action, but it remains merely a form. Formal ideas of law and political freedom are useless foundations for historical transformation if they are divorced from cultural convictions and deeper beliefs (see for example, *Kotliarevskii 1906*). By linking culture and constitutional liberties, Kotliarevskii and his colleagues sought to emphasize that all historical change must remain firmly embedded in an empirical present, rather than fixated on a remote future. Semën Frank stressed that culture could not be sacrificed to a distant vision of human happiness when he wrote that “culture exists not for some good or purpose, but only for itself” (1994 [1909], 139). For him this emphasis on culture was what would enable politics to take the form of “direct, altruistic, day-to-day service to the people's immediate needs.” He warned that revolutionary optimism devalues “simple, individual person-to-person aid, mere relief of current sorrows and anxieties, [which] not only pales and loses its moral attractiveness but even seems a harmful waste of time and energy on petty, useless concerns, a betrayal of all mankind and its eternal salvation for the sake of a few individuals close at hand” (142). Culture, in this view, represents a concern for individual well-being not as a future goal, but rather as a continuous process, enacted in the various practices, institutions, and structures of a given society (see also *Kelly 1998*, 111).

These thinkers argued that a further problem with the Russian liberal worldview and their own actions was that they had focused not on preserving values such as culture and order (*gosudarstvennost'*), but on destroying government authority. Even though they were suspicious of tsarist authorities, Kotliarevskii, Novgorodtsev, and others now found a new meaning in the legitimizing role of the state and existing institutions in a transitional order for a new society. Kotliarevskii explored the implications of a national culture, refined over centuries, for concepts such as democracy, tolerance, and the lawful state (see for example Kotliarevskii 1915; 1907; 1906). Struve's nationalism, meanwhile, expressed itself in his idea that the state is "an organism of an entirely special kind" that contributed to the principle of stability (1908, 104); even though he was opposed to autocracy in principle, he argued that it was undeniable that Russian society had been shaped by the particular form of statehood that marked its history. And he observed ruefully that: "[a] regime which had taken shape historically, over centuries, was supposed to fall to pieces as soon as it had made the concession which settled in principle the question of a Russian constitution" (1994 [1909], 123). For Struve in particular, a fundamental problem of Russia's intellectual elite was its permanent "dissociation" from the state, which went beyond the rejection of absolutism to a persistent disavowal of the state's role in any form of beneficial change. Instead, what was needed was a clear statement of the role of inherited political culture and institutions, and at least a minimal understanding of the loyalties and emotional attachments that they evoked among the population at large.

With hindsight Kotliarevskii wrote of Russia's compromised Revolution, and his own involvement in it: "We placed excessive value on law, which also implies the duty not to create idols (*kumiry*) for oneself, but to look life directly in the face—poor, cramped, and earthly" (1913, 331). In a study explicitly concerned with the problem of how to pass from autocracy to a rule of law state, Novgorodtsev echoed this sentiment that individual imperfectability must be the starting point for any theory of change. Human nature, he observed, cannot be transformed, nor can a perfect society be established; individuals will maintain their "selfish impulses" and "self-serving aspirations," and these must be factored in to any account of change (1909, 329). Correspondingly, he insisted that prescriptions for social improvement should be modest and that any progress made will only be partial and slow: development is a complex process, involving the interaction between the complementary institutions of society, including the church, government, and family structures (1921 [1911–16]), 23, 77). In practice, he observed, all aspirations for freedom and progress are reduced to "tireless work" aimed at achieving "increasingly complex goals" through the accumulation of knowledge (21). Those desiring beneficial change could address this dilemma through their participation in practical politics, but they could not hope to overcome it. In this way Novgorodtsev and others distanced themselves from an optimistic belief in the development of history in the direction of constitutional democracy, and sought to pass on their experience as conservatives who had actively participated in a revolution.

CONCLUSION

In July 2013, two of Russia's best-known writers, Mikhail Shishkin and Boris Akunin (real name Grigorii Chkhartishvili), engaged in a spirited discussion of Russia's current situation on the pages of *Afisha*, a major magazine. Repeating the question that had tormented morally conscious Russians in the Imperial period, "What is to be done?", Shishkin asked Akunin:

What is to be done?, What should you do today if, on the one hand, you do not want to become part of a criminal structure—and the entire state and life in Russia has become one huge criminal structure—and, on the other hand, you do not want to launch a revolution?

While this discussion concerns the outlines of present day Russia under President Vladimir Putin, examples of the dilemma Shishkin outlines, between support for a flawed present and equally flawed alternatives, could probably be found in all cultures and historical periods. While the dilemma is clearly not confined to conservatives—my case study illustrated how, in polarized political circumstances, a range of political preferences may collapse into one another—the dilemma is perhaps felt most acutely by thinkers with conservative sympathies.

The Russian thinkers examined here held shifting views as to whether safe forms of change were primarily threatened by revolutionary socialists or the Tsarist government, and their insights into how political theories of Western origin—both conservative and liberal—might apply in Russia's situation were constantly evolving.¹⁴ The individuals discussed all desired that the Tsarist autocracy would become a lawful state (in most cases a constitutional monarchy), and ardently wished that this transformation would occur gradually, organically, and without violence. At times, these philosophical premises led Nikitenko, Struve, Novgorodtsev, and others to argue for circumscribed changes to the status quo, at others they took a more active, and even revolutionary, role. Faced with the dilemma of defending the rule of law under despotism, they temporarily and tentatively explored how participating in a revolution could nevertheless bring about change that was respectful of the past. One could say that while experiencing the arbitrary rule of absolute monarchy, these thinkers became revolutionary conservatives, willing to use radical means to defend values such as stability and tradition. But by and large their experience merely confirmed the view that no revolution can proceed in a considered and controlled fashion. Nikitenko's sympathy for revolution was confined to his diaries, but the radicalism that Struve and others experienced first-hand ultimately reinforced their sense of the value of a conservative approach to change. In this, they exemplify the way that conservative theory is modified on the ground, and adapted to tumultuous political circumstances.

Reflecting back on the Revolution of 1905 with the perspective of hindsight, these thinkers sound remarkably like their conservative counterparts in Western Europe. In the aftermath of 1905, Struve and others changed their assessment of the status quo and attributed to it at least some value. The contradiction in their political views thus emerged from a hiatus in their thought as to the proper way of assessing the present and what might be "used and enjoyed." At the same time, this example also

illustrates the impossibility of defending a conservative theory of change in a polarized political environment. The attractiveness of these thinkers' views on change—and political philosophies generally—was damaged by the fact that the imperial Russian state never did pass from a private to a public conception of law (see Wortman 1976 and Poole 2006). While the Revolution of 1905 ostensibly marked the transition to a constitutional era, in practice the Russian Empire remained an autocratic rather than a rule of law state. Ultimately, simultaneous arguments in favour of incremental change, of tradition, and respect for the rule of law forced these thinkers into continual contradiction with themselves, and in the decade before 1917 these “conservative-liberals” retreated from politics and worked primarily as scholars.¹⁵

There can be no doubt that the categories in the Russian debate often appear radically different from those which the West conventionally uses to discuss philosophical conservatism. Yet the fact that Russians who favored gradual change and the rule of law turned to revolution does not, I do not think, testify to an incoherence in their views. Rather it suggests that in the absence of certain preconditions derived from Western experience, conservatism will take on surprising new forms that make sense in the historical context in which they occur, to the extent that it is no longer recognizable as conservatism as we know it. We are left with an example that provides a relevant reminder of what it means to be a conservative (and even a revolutionary) on the ground, operating within the constraints of politics and culture.¹⁶

NOTES

1. For the purposes of this essay, conservatism is an ideology associated with the traits, loosely adapted from Quinton (2007), of traditionalism, political skepticism, and organicism. My understanding of ideology, a structural configuration of political concepts, has been informed by Freedman (1996).
2. I here associate liberalism with a persistent cluster of ideas including individualism, universalism, egalitarianism, and individual autonomy, as well as the view that politics consists in striking a balance between competing ideals.
3. While Edmund Burke's “Reflections on the Revolution in France” is the most famous response to the event, there is a large body of literature on conservative interpretations of the French Revolution. See, for example, Schofield (1986) and Shlapentokh (1996).
4. Interesting studies of Russian conservatism, even if they do not always respect this distinction, include Pipes (2005) and Grosul (2000). An overview of some literature on the topic is given in Hamburg (2005). See also Kaehne (2007) and Dahl (1999, 107–11).
5. He made the statement in his first public speech in January 1895.
6. An abridged version of the diaries exists in English; see Nikitenko (1975), from which the quotes below are taken.
7. Nikitenko served for more than forty years in various offices of the Ministry of Education and the Censorship Department.
8. My account of Nikitenko has been influenced by the discussion in Kelly (1998, 119–33).
9. At the time of independence in 1861, roughly 45 percent of the Russian population, or some 35,000,000 people were serfs, without any property or ability to testify in court (see Riasanovsky 1984, 345). The “Great Reforms” initiated by Tsar Alexander II also revamped the legal system, reducing its secrecy and reliance on the class system, and created the *zemstvo* system of local self-government structures, a system of elected councils designed to administer local affairs.
10. All of these thinkers were organizers of the Liberation Movement, founders of the Kadet Party, and played active roles in Russia's constitutional experiment until 1907. In the following decade they worked primarily as scholars, concerned with Russia's social and cultural transformation. For their roles in the development of philosophical liberalism in Russia see, in particular, Poole (2003) and Nethercott (2010). For additional biographical information in English see Pipes on Struve (1970; 1980); Boobyer on Frank (1995); Poole on Kotliarevskii (2006); and (on Novgorodtsev) Putnam (1977).

11. As a rule, the Social Democrats and Socialist Revolutionaries did not cooperate with this movement, known as the Liberation Movement (see Galai 1973). The definitive study of the 1905 Revolution in English is Ascher (1988).
12. In 1906 the Tsar granted the country a constitution and an elected legislature. The Constitutional-Democratic (Kadet) Party, a recognizably liberal party, was created in 1905 and won majorities in the first two Russian parliaments in 1906 and 1907, but was adversely affected by changes to the electoral law in 1907, which were arbitrary and unconstitutional, and inaugurated a new era which significantly favored candidates close to the government. Another political party created in 1905 that counted conservative thinkers among its members was the Union of 17 October, or the Octobrist Party (see Galai 2004; Hosking 1973).
13. Judith Zimmerman refers to these authors, among others, as attempting to create “a form of liberalism which differs from the mainstream of Russian political thought” (1976, 307).
14. To be sure, Russian thinkers themselves were not overly concerned with labels they associated with European theory, but felt were not wholly applicable to their own circumstances. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries they did not consistently self-identify as liberals or conservatives, though they sometimes used the terminology when addressing foreign audiences.
15. Their intellectual trajectories also diverged. It must be noted that Struve’s nationalism went beyond the claims of conservative nationalism and became an aggressive chauvinism.
16. I would like to thank Martin Beckstein, Francis Cheneval, Roman Schibli, participants in the 2014 University of Zurich Conservatism Workshop, and two anonymous reviewers for their suggestions on how to improve this article. Research for this topic was supported by the ETH Zurich Postdoctoral Fellowship Program, the Marie Curie Actions for People COFUND Program, and the Society in Science – Branco Weiss Fellowship.

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