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Putin Should Consider a 19th-Century Blogger

By Kathleen Parthe

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The always-crowded jubilee landscape in Russia will be dominated this year by commemorations of the epic struggle against Napoleon. A second event, the anniversary of writer Alexander Herzen's birth on April 6, 1812, is itself linked to the invasion. Herzen's book "My Past and Thoughts" famously begins with his repeated requests to his nurse for the story of how the French advanced on Moscow as his disorganized, aristocratic family delayed their departure. When the fires began and supplies dwindled, his family gathered with their servants at their mansion on Tverskoi Bulvar. Herzen's father, Ivan Yakovlev, used his fluent French to request permission to leave the city. In return for his family's safety, he was personally tasked by Napoleon to take a peace proposal to Tsar Alexander I, a mission that temporarily put Yakovlev in jeopardy as a suspected traitor. All ended peacefully, and Herzen's father got to live out his days as a disgruntled — but elegant and well-read — former guards officer. His son, illegitimate but well-treated, channeled his own discontent with the status quo into a lifetime of practical opposition in Russia and abroad until his death in 1870.

Herzen's links to the Russia of 2012 go much deeper than this autobiographical note. His lifelong analysis of political behavior fits remarkably well with the Soviet and post-Soviet eras that followed, all the way up to the eve of Vladimir Putin's third term as president. Even Herzen's methods seem modern, as he proved adept at quickly organizing the information sent by his correspondents and adding brief, pungent commentary. When he first announced the biweekly Kolokol (The Bell) in 1857, he explained that "events in Russia are moving quickly and must be caught on the fly and discussed right away." For all practical purposes, he is responsible for Russia's first political blog.

After writing about the European upheaval of 1848, most memorably in "From the Other Shore," Herzen decided to use his considerable wealth to address his homeland directly through proclamations, almanacs and Kolokol, which was printed abroad and smuggled back to Russia from 1857 to 1867. With its motto "Vivos Voco" (I summon the living), borrowed from German poet Friedrich Schiller, Kolokol rang all over the empire, from Siberian places of exile and late-night student gatherings in Moscow to government ministries and the Winter Palace, stimulating lively debate during the transformative first decade of "Tsar-Liberator" Alexander II's reign.

Having gained a large following, Herzen risked everything — his reputation, the possibility of return, even his personal safety — to defend Polish freedom in 1863. For Herzen, everyone's freedom had equal value, and Russia could not liberate itself while oppressing other nations. A century later, his cry "For their freedom and ours!" rallied dissidents in Moscow to stand up to the Soviet Union's brutal suppression of the Prague Spring. Until the end, Herzen strove to teach Russians the importance of having political ethics and a plan of action, so they neither rushed to violent solutions nor faltered every time the government rattled its sabers.

In translating Herzen's articles from Kolokol, I have found it impossible to ignore the modern relevance of his observations on topics like unfulfilled reform agendas, crime and punishment, journalists, liberals and the power of political satire. Soon after reforms began under Alexander II, Herzen detected problems with top-down change that was secured neither by laws nor institutions. In the great emancipation of 1861, for example, the serfs were freed but many students were arrested and universities were closed. Fearing even the appearance of vulnerability, the authorities rushed in one direction, then in another. Herzen compared the tsar to Ilya Muromets, a Kievan Rus hero who faced a choice of three roads forward. In the epic tale, Ilya bravely followed what he knew to be the most dangerous path because he had confidence in himself. Alexander II attempted to travel all three roads at once, compromising and betraying everything he had promised to fix.

Well-acquainted with the Third Section of His Majesty's Chancellery — the political police — Herzen called the tsar's continued use of these forces a case of "Genghis Khan plus the telegraph." The equally unreformed Russian prison system, for whose excesses no one took responsibility, caused him to ask in 1866 what the conditions were "in which they place robust young people so that they cannot last five years?" With these controls still very much in place, whatever privileges had been given to literature, the nobility and universities were ultimately an illusion.

Both in Russia and abroad, Herzen experienced firsthand the perils of investigative reporting.

He never regretted the risks he took for himself but worried about those back in Russia who could face severe penalties for corresponding with him or even for keeping copies of his publications. He felt nothing but contempt for Mikhail Katkov and other journalists who would stop at nothing to stay in the state's good graces. Katkov left the progressive camp early on, but he was eventually followed by others who attempted to forge a safe kind of liberal conservation. Herzen despised this well-educated and well-traveled group who "saw the possibility of keeping all the advantages of liberalism without any of the disadvantages of being in opposition," reminding his readers that "we have a great many policemen and very few rights."

A master of irony, Herzen believed in the revolutionary power of laughter to topple idols. He remembered how when he returned from internal exile in the early 1840s, laughter could once again be heard in public and private gatherings, which did not bode well for the autocracy. He observed how the people's mood could change quickly, and what was formerly respected or feared could turn into an object of derision. The absurd actions of puppets and puppet masters at the highest level of power would no longer pass unnoticed. As for anniversaries, already a national obsession in the 1860s, Herzen thought it ridiculous to spend so much effort celebrating Russia's past rather than trying to solve the formidable problems of the present day. Given the fickleness of Russian state power toward the elite, he thought that the millennium bell dedicated in Novgorod in 1862 should probably be covered with plaques for "temporarily important people."

Despite formidable analytical gifts, Herzen did not like playing the prophet. He saw history as an improvisation and was not happy when his negative predictions turned out to be correct because he loved his homeland and had great hopes for its future. In the last year of his life, he wrote to Nikolai Ogaryov, a collaborator on Kolokol, that while they had been on target sometimes, "at other times we were working for the 20th century."

In the 200th year since Herzen's birth, it is well worth taking another look at his political essays to see what insights he can offer us about the Russia of 2012.

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