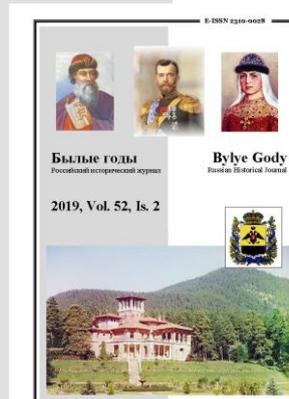


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## The Problem of Nihilism in the Conservative-Democratic Discourse of the 1860s – 1890s

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### Abstract

The Slavophiles and the Pochvenniki considered the society to be the main agent of nation-building – the reason why we refer to them as Conservative Democrats. Their ideologies were based on anti-aristocratic stance, a strive towards forming the national identity on the foundation of a peculiarly understood Orthodox spirituality. The main targets of criticism by Slavophile advocates were ‘aristocratic opposition’ and ‘revolutionary conservatism’: the forms of conservative politics and ideology that provoked revolutionary upheavals and were thus their root cause. Left radicalism was considered by the Slavophiles as a variety of ‘tyranny of theory over life’. Not recognizing in it any positive content, the Slavophiles considered it a symptom of a disease afflicting the national organism. The unfinished cycle by K.K. Tolstoy printed in Aksakov’s *Rus’* ushered in a number of publications on the issues of Nihilism by N.N. Gilyarov-Platonov and N.Ya. Danilevsky. Gilyarov-Platonov’s considerations were further developed by his nephew, F.A. Gilyarov. However, his book “The Fifteen Years of Sedition” contained harsh attacks on the authorities and “Katkov’s school”. The numerous works of N.N. Strakhov were the most serious philosophical study of Nihilism. In the course of time, the revolutionary ideology changed. ‘Pure’ Nihilism was receding into the past in the 1870s; the Narodniki and the Marxists considered themselves to be the promoters of a positive agenda. But Conservatives did not recognize this positive element – and, arguing with the Marxists, continued to use the polemic repertoire of the old anti-nihilist discourse. At the same time, there was no single approach to Marxism in Conservative circles. Thus, for Ilovaisky it was a phenomenon alien to Russia. For Sharapov, on the contrary, it was a product of Russian life.

**Keywords:** Slavophilism, Conservatism, Nihilism, revolution, Narodniki, autocracy, Marxism.

### 1. Introduction

The Slavophilism began in the aristocratic salons of Moscow. However, towards the turn of the 1860s, as it was gradually transforming from a trend in philosophy into a political ideology, it was becoming increasingly popular among various groups inside the educated class, including civil servants. A symptom of this transformation was the Pochvennichestvo movement of the 1860s commonly associated with the publications of F.M. Dostoevsky. I.S. Aksakov’s response to it was one of great skepticism: “The people of St. Petersburg are aping, they are mocking the Russians by wearing Russian zipuns and okhabens!” (Aksakov, 1891: 72). And yet, the differences between the Den’ and the Vremya appear to have been generally those in style. This is why in this paper both the Slavophilism and the Pochvennichestvo are viewed as two varieties of the same ideology, the distinctive features of the latter being the protest against social categories and the enthusiasm to make its own interpretation of Orthodox spirituality the foundation for the national identity.

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## 2. Materials and methods

Methodologically, the paper uses the historical and objective approach, employing historical and political description. In terms of sources, special attention is given to the debates in the press: the *Den*, the *Rus*, the *Sovremennye Izvestiya*, and other newspapers.

The Slavophilism is viewed as a form of post-reform Russian nationalism. As they considered the society to be the main agent of nation-building, the Slavophiles and the Pochvenniki stood in as Conservative Democrats of some sort. Despite all their resentment of revolutionary changes (Badalyan, 2018), the Slavophiles' criticism was aimed at the 'aristocratic opposition' (Kotov, 2017a) and 'revolutionary conservatism', i.e. the forms of conservative policy and ideology that led to revolutionary upheavals, and thus were their root cause.

## 3. Discussion

In the well-known brochure against R.A. Faddeev, Yu.F. Samarin put forward a universal definition of this phenomenon: "a formally correct syllogism turned into a battering ram against the breathing life" (Samarin, Dmitriev, 1875: 10). That "the tyranny of theory over life is the worst kind of tyranny" was also pointed out by I.S. Aksakov in 1865. His editorials portrayed the French Revolution as "...an orgy of theory feasting on the ruins of creation, of the living, a mayhem of tyranny of abstract and conceited rationality of certain individuals, which sacrificed the national consciousness and morals for the theoretical understanding of the national ideal and gave up the real, non-political, true freedom of living, the idea of the people, and the very people of France – gave it all up for a theoretical interpretation of liberty" (*The Den*. 1865. № 5). Of no less concern for I.S. Aksakov was the state system established after the Revolution: "...there is no tyranny more painful and brutal than the kind put forth by a 'theory of liberty' armed with the government's sword and crowned with the Jacobin cap or aristocratic helmet. Nothing in this world is more dangerous than a theory with such *insignia regia*, a theory that has the support of the authorities and enjoys every opportunity to tear life apart according to its own speculative idea of the public welfare, to knead it like dough, to mold it like plaster and make figurines to suit its own taste. And as we said before, this danger is the more profound, the less rebuff it faces from life itself in the consciousness of the society or the people" (*The Den*. 1865. № 6).

While speaking about the West, I.S. Aksakov also referred to the Westernism, i.e. St. Petersburg, particularly in pointing out "the dangers of theory coming together with bureaucracy, especially where life is silent, where the society is inactive and powerless, and where to the civil servants in their 'beautiful faraway' the very people appear to be some kind of a *tabula rasa*, a plastic, flexible material, capable to assimilate all the well-meant if forced impositions" (*The Den*. 1865. № 6). The roots of these attitudes were seen by I.S. Aksakov, as well as other Slavophiles, in the reforms of Peter I: "Nihilism is a natural, rightful, historical result of the negative stance adopted by the Russian thought and Russian art after Peter. Going back in time, the beginning of our 'literature' (in the narrow sense) was satire! This negation must eventually come to negate itself. That is the process of our social consciousness and the historical justification of nihilism. In particular, it indicates protest, unjust at times yet beneficial, because it does not allow coming to terms with many a lie and vulgarity on the one hand, and on the other, through its attacks on the truth, it encourages the adherents of the truth to be more prudent, rigorous and critical in verifying and defending it". (*The Den*. 1864. №31).

Seen through this lens, nihilism was not the main concern: it appeared secondary not to the 'Polish issue', but to the 'partition wall of bureaucracy' that was decomposing the body of the nation. Revolutionary and socialist theories "... appeal to senses rather than mind, they are a matter of taste more than a sincere, profound conviction [...] One thing leaves no doubt: the starting point for all is a deep *historical* feeling of dissatisfaction or the historically formed *negative* attitude towards Russian life". Aksakov accused revolutionaries of unwillingness to study Russian life: "The present appears to me [i.e. a revolutionary – A.K.] as malign, but what exactly is malign and how it could be improved – I neither know nor wish to trouble my brain with finding the answers; it is best to destroy it all, to start a commotion, and come what may!" Such is the logic of our 'terrorists', the people [...] of the weakest rationale but of firm spirit, who have embraced the relatively easiest and most tempting choice – easy for requiring no intellectual effort, exploration or research (the only thing necessary is to silence the conscience), and at the same time tempting, like a bold and daring adventure, like an opportunity to become a secret political power competing with mighty states". Further on, the destructive stance dialectically transformed into a 'despotic' theory: "What in Western Europe has a solid historical foundation and is a true, acute pain in the social body, when adapted to our lifestyle and manners, loses its viability and turns into either a speculative doctrine or sheer nonsense: neither a Russian peasant, nor a labourer can possibly be grieved over with Western grief!.." (*The Rus*. 1882. №41).

From all this Aksakov concluded: "Nihilism, with all the other *isms* attached to it, is utter rubbish as a positive *teaching*, but as a *phenomenon* it is very important: it is a symptom of a profound historical disease, a genuine sign that something somewhere is unwell, and seriously unwell". However, all that he could suggest to the 'government' in his article was "to study the social phenomenon, to diagnose the disease, rather than outright deny it or exacerbate it with the external, superficial measures." (*The Rus*. 1882. №41).

In April 1881 Aksakov added: "The Russian people were not yet free, but only being freed, and it was by the Socialists that the task of setting the people free was hindered". For the Socialists, "dictatorship,

violence, and fraud” were means to an end, the end being “to become the government” themselves. This goal was regarded by the Slavophiles as corrupt. Yet, according to Aksakov, the problem was “not Socialism as a teaching or a utopia”, the problem was “*Nihilism*. And Nihilism is the epitome of negation, the negation of soul, of absolute truth, of any virtue or moral obligation, – it is a ruthlessly consistent materialism”. Now the editor of the *Rus'* urged not the authorities, but the youth: “...you can, if you please, remain engulfed by utopias, unhealthy as it may be, but do rid your Socialist dreams and ideals of any notion of *violence*. When speaking about freedom, do not lean to the idea that tyranny or despotism are the means, supposedly essential, at least temporarily, to carry out the Socialist *experimenta in anima vili*” (*The Rus'*. 1881. №24).

Both for Katkov and the Slavophiles Nihilism was closely intertwined with the issues of education. In 1884, taking part in the discussion of the recently adopted “retrograde” University Statute, I.S. Aksakov wrote that the chief problem of the Russian society was the “intellectual proletariat” of a sort, which in Russia was “not an abundance of educated and gifted people lacking opportunity to win their bread with their expertise and talent, but an excessive number of \_cultured mediocrities\_ with but superficial knowledge, uprooted by schooling from their natural milieu, who have floated off one bank but have not reached the other, unfit for any good work, – in short, *nowhere-men, good-for-nothing-men*”. Of course, universities were among the suppliers of this ‘proletariat’, but Aksakov saw the underlying cause not in the fact of there being or not being a formal autonomy of universities, but in the artificial, borrowed character of Russian education: “Where the system of education developed freely and naturally as a result of public life itself, the treatment of illnesses provoked by the system also happens naturally through the course of life, in a close tie with the very process of social development. In stark contrast are the countries where education is exclusively imposed by the government through artificial measures [...] to serve the government’s needs” (*The Rus'*. 1884. №16).

This explains why the issue of universities’ autonomy was not seen by Aksakov as one of great significance. According to him, to solve the problem it was necessary to separate higher education from the “daily bread in its literal sense” and to provide the graduates of non-classical secondary schools and engineering schools with enough opportunity for respectable employment: “Give them a prospect for a career and income outside the classics and universities, relieving the latter of their privileges and power, – only then will it be possible for serious education and research to take root” (*The Rus'*. 1884. №16).

Of course, this measure was not viewed as a universal remedy. The editor of the *Rus'* believed that “fighting the trend that prevails among our ‘educated class’ probably requires tools and techniques very different from those normally used by the representatives of the other trend, – i.e. clearly not to mention the methods of intimidation, which are of no use and only encourage obstinacy and resistance for the sake of ‘honour’ and some kind of ‘heroism’, and not to mention suppressing and silencing the other party, which would only exacerbate the problem by sweeping it under the rug”. So, in the same issue of the *Rus'* Aksakov starts publishing the “Essays on the Dominant Worldview”, an unfinished cycle by K.K. Tolstoy. Their author, who had previously been keen on ‘modern’ ideas but then became disappointed in the ‘liberal catechism’, put his primary task as follows: “To undermine the belief in the points that are thought to be beyond dispute (the external equality, liberty, the arithmetic morals according to which harm done to one person is compensated by the good done to two, etc.), to help the people liberate themselves from the tangle of concepts in which I was trapped all my life” (*The Rus'*. 1884. №16).

The text stood out against the typical pages of the *Rus'* in terms of both content and style, but the editor justified the presence of the leftist discourse by the necessity “in a free dispute with the adherents of this trend ... using *their* language, to learn *their* argument (mostly unknown to those who hold different views) and with *this argument* to beat this trend”. An additional justification was illustrated by the quote from Yu.F. Samarin: “materialism is the acid to brighten the faded face of the Orthodox Christianity” (*The Rus'*. 1884. №16).

K.K. Tolstoy’s antithesis to the ‘spiritless’ modernity was the second half of the 1850s: “We, the people of the 1960s, [...] were there to see the end of serfdom in Russia and could see both the oppressors and the oppressed. And, strange as it might seem, however hard the outer life of the latter was, their inner life was happier and more complete. Everyone’s life was easier then. The people believed, hoped, loved, and trusted each other much more than they do today. Gloomy despair or irredeemable apathy were hardly ever to be met with. The feebleness of exhaustion and the disinterest in life, which are so common today, did not exist.” Compared with this idyll, the present day looked bleak: “It is different now. We do not believe in the truth. Or better say, we cannot tell a lie from the truth, we have lost our instinct for good and evil. A predator today has every opportunity to justify before himself and others *anything* he does, even the most villainous things.” As an example Tolstoy refers to the “famous defense speeches in court, which argued that the defendant *could not* steal or kill because of his *upbringing*, his *manners*, because of his *being accustomed to a high standard of living*, as well as speculations about insanity, about the ‘environment’, about the end justifying the means, etc.” (*The Rus'*. 1884. №16).

According to Tolstoy, the popularity of the ‘negative’ ideas among his generation resulted from the crisis of the Christian social values corrupted by the ‘camphor oil’ of “the likes of Porfiry ‘Little Judas’ Golovlyov”. It was as a response to the profanation of Christianity that the new all-despising hero came into being – “he worshipped only the so called *energy* and himself as its primary vessel”. The core of his

worldview was the negation of Supreme Reason: “The Universe contains nothing more than matter and power. Man is a machine, which loses its capacity to do any work when destroyed. The purpose of life is happiness. Happiness for man is the free exercise of talents and the maximum satisfaction of all his needs... People create societies for the sake of material convenience and mutual benefit. All members of society are equal and are of equal value for the community, and thus the only moral criterion is arithmetic: the benefit of the majority is the absolute good, while the benefit of a minority is the absolute evil. To keep up this kind of mathematical justice is the main purpose of the society. To fulfill its purpose, the society must act like a machine: an individual must have no impact on public matters... Children’s upbringing must be an entirely public task, while the society has to create a carefully designed system for manufacturing human personalities to match a unified top-of-the-line template.” Tolstoy believed that this simplistic philosophy was shared by “all our social groups known as ‘the Liberals’, ‘the Socialists’, ‘the Nihilists’, ‘the Red’, ‘the Westerners’, ‘the Democrats’, ‘the Radicals’, ‘the New People’ and the rest, in short – all the educated class except ‘the Slavophiles’ and ‘the Conservatives’ together with those who have not raised their voice yet” ([The Rus’. 1884. №16](#)).

The adherents of the new trend were initially the ‘idealists of materialism’, but at its later stage Tolstoy observes a rapid profanation of the ideals: “The teaching quickly gained popularity and spread from the studies, home offices and libraries of the educated class to the hallways and entry rooms. The worship of the material was particularly suitable for all sorts of thieves and scoundrels [...] From the same teaching stem our contemporary morals and manners: the apathy and feebleness of the honest, the bravery and arrogance of the scoundrels, the rampage of bestial desires, – in a word, the *pornification* of the Russian society.” ([The Rus’. 1884. №16](#)). According to Tolstoy, the “incredible swiftness” “with which our new ideals became vulgar” was caused by egalitarianism: “Strictly speaking, the absence of true equality among people is so obvious that it would not be worth discussing. [...] But the encyclopaedists of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the Great French Revolution with its ‘human rights’ promoted the idea that individual differences between people are an artificial product, and as such can be easily eliminated and are to be eliminated for the sake of the ‘common good’. This idea [...] is now considered a gospel truth and has become the central tenet of the liberal creed.” After emphasizing the innate differences between people K.K. Tolstoy finally states: “True equality of people has never existed, it does not exist now and never will” ([The Rus’. 1884. №18](#)).

The author was planning to move on to the analysis of the ‘liberal’ idea of equality before the law, but his first two essays were responded to by an article by N.Ya. Danilevsky and then another one by N.P. Gilyarov-Platonov, after which the publishing of Tolstoy’s pamphlet was suspended.

Unlike K.K. Tolstoy, N.Ya. Danilevsky argued that the problem of Nihilism was not in “being made foul and vulgar [...] by the likes of Little Judas or Tartuffe”, nor in the fact of “the new ideals of Nihilist ethics being made foul and vulgar by the likes of Yuhantsov and his fellows”. In fact, by Nihilism Danilevsky referred “not to a general materialist trend that believes its foundation to rest in the area of pure reasoning [...] but to the very Nihilist materialism, which from its first day stepped right into the moral realm and is thus rooted in it”. This is why the ‘Little Judases of Nihilism’ do not exactly make the nihilist ideals ‘vulgar’: “On the contrary, these practical nihilists were the only adherents of the new teaching to have a complete logical understanding of it, they were the only ones who proved consistent and faithful to its ethos.” Danilevsky suggested that the new Nihilist ethics should be labelled “the ethics of subjective eudemonism, i.e. a teaching, according to which only a personally experienced happiness can be claimed to matter; the happiness of other creatures must appear as delusion, fantasy, or hallucination, which no clever and consistent follower of the teaching would possibly need or even pay any attention to” ([The Rus’. 1884. №22](#)).

Reflecting on the sources of this world-view, the author of the theory of historical-cultural types rejected any connection with either serfdom or the “Polish issue”, or with the problems in education: “So, I declare that neither the classics, nor any other pedagogical method can prevent the start, development or expansion of materialism or nihilism, or any false teaching. Likewise, an opposing approach cannot bring them forth, unless, of course, it is directly aimed at propagating them among the studying youth.” According to Danilevsky, nihilism was not a product of “individual vices” and could not be cured through their correction: “From each occasion of such treatment we can expect but individual changes, which, due to the general connection between all the processes in the life of the people and the state, can produce minor results in other areas of public life, yet still remain but individual improvements. They cannot be a universal remedy that could promise us every imaginable good and the cure of every imaginable vice, because nihilism is a symptom of a general malaise in society” ([The Rus’. 1884. №22](#)). The cause of this malaise was seen by Danilevsky in the character of Western civilization, which the Russian society made borrowings from: the abuse and crime in the Catholic church, and the vices of feudalism, the fight against which led to “absolutely the same results, i.e. to the industrial feudalism replacing the old feudalism of landed aristocracy” ([The Rus’. 1884. №23](#)).

At the same time, while negating Western vice, Western Nihilism fought against the “actual facts of Western life”; however, its Russian variety, in the absence of such facts on Russian soil, turned malign: “Precisely when the hopes of the people were coming true, when the nation’s political ideal was fulfilling itself in a most brilliant and unprecedented manner, – precisely then Nihilism was coming into being, i.e. there was arising a negation, including and even chiefly, the negation of this very ideal. What could serve better

evidence that our Nihilism is an imitation, that it lacks originality and authenticity, that it has no solid foundation? Is it not apparent now that it did not have Russian life as its birth place?" But whereas in the West the proliferation of Nihilism was hampered by the rich material and cultural heritage, in Russia "the Westernism, which deliberately promoted imitation, did not have a capable opponent. The only opposition was represented by state-owned periodicals, whose scarcity of talent, nauseating servility, and false and sugary tone only facilitated the Westerners' cause by setting the latter off against its own unfavourable background" (*The Rus'*. 1884. №23).

Overflowing with keen notions was the article of another Slavophile – N.P. Gilyarov-Platonov. Although he disagreed with Aksakov, who accused the Nihilists of speculative theorizing, he did so in letter, but not in spirit: "Theoretic Nihilism does not exist. Whatever is said to be such is in fact a borrowed sophistication, an assemblage of ready-made ideas, a half-baked compilation of scraps and fragments from German, French, and English books, which, to make things worse, belong to different schools [...] Not a grain of inspiration or creativity; no sign of reflection; the intent is resentful". However, the nature of this intent was that of a response, if not to say of reaction: "Nihilism is the resentment of the Russian soul. Resentment against what? Against social system as a whole, against social order, against the form, to say the least [...] That is the beginning of Nihilism. Only the blind were unable to see how it grew. Callousness, hypocrisy, the hegemony of form, and a public and administrative mayhem, - that is what gave it life. So where can the fair resentment be channeled? Where can the perplexed mind find peace? What forms and food for thought are there for it? In other words, where is science and where is proper freedom?" (*The Rus'*. 1884. №24).

Gilyarov-Platonov's ideas were further developed by his nephew F.A. Gilyarov. His satirical articles which were published in his uncle's *Sovremennye Izvestiya* were later included in the book "The Fifteen Years of Sedition" – seemingly well-intentioned on the surface, it contained even harsher criticism of Katkov's school. Some of the latter's representatives, according to the author, "did not attempt to reveal the causes of sedition, nor investigated the criminal facts, but began, even in the press, enquiries into the innocent, beneficial and even glorious reforms of the previous reign. Everything was condemned: school, local government, courts, literature, periodicals, the entire society" (*Gilyarov, 1883: II*).

The authorities were criticized by Gilyarov Jr. too. Initially, he argued, "the pro-government party" was more of an illusion, but "there were indiscriminate arrests, the boiling foam of political processes was raised, and eventually it was declared necessary to arrange as though a raid of the learning generation for reading and circulating the most worthless works of the concealed literature, which is invariably nothing but a venomous aftermath of suppressing open public communication." The process of the 193 caused a particular social stir: "One error was followed by another, and as a result of this process that would only fit a revolution-ridden country, which was not the case with us, we had a real, not imaginary, faction of terrorists" (*Gilyarov, 1883: XIV-XV*).

Gilyarov saw the revolutionary movement as rooted in a number of causes: "The immediate source of sedition appear to have been the sparks of the Polish Insurrection of 1863, the internal and external conspiracy, the Nihilist propaganda in the press of the late 1850s and early 1860s that preached atheism and materialism in the shattered family, the instigation in the Russian emigrant press and the guidance of the International Workingmen's Association. But the most fertile soil was provided by a combination of the semi-free press with the impoverishment of the aristocracy, and the pressure on the clergy through restrictions on congregation; both these classes with their sons blacklisted since they were in school and their daughters confused by theories of the 'women's issue'; and amidst the ignorance and half-education, the fat, profiteering plutocracy rising boldly, proudly and greedily, from the humus supplied by serfdom, above the impoverished peasants... And what about the government? The administration? Social institutions? We shall neither defend nor accuse them; but their mistakes, inevitable at the sharp turn Russian life took, very likely did less damage than the bashing of *all* government operations, *all* administrative orders, *all* public institutions, this derangement of all for the sake of derangement, which has become an unconscious habit." (*Gilyarov, 1883: II-III*).

Arguing with Katkov and the like-minded writers and civil servants, Gilyarov emphasized: "The unreasonable hopes that were placed on the classical system clearly did not come true. The movement of sedition matured when the new Gymnasium Statute was introduced, and reached its peak among the generation that graduated without any concessions to the old curriculum... And so, with all due respect to the classics as our only system of education, it had nothing to do with providing an antidote to Nihilism." But as it would be inconvenient to look for advocacy for the modern idea of ungovernment in the realm of ancient republican writings, so it would be even more erroneous to suggest that the new Gymnasium Statute could facilitate the criminal movement... To think that classical education fueled the sedition would be as unreasonable as to accuse non-classical education of the same, the way it was done once before. Nihilism, which began in the era of classical secondary education and grew in the era of non-classical one, developed on its own, while education followed its path independently too." (*Gilyarov, 1883: 242-243*).

Also of interest is F.A. Gilyarov's analysis of the social composition of the revolutionary movement, the results of which can be found already in the preface: "Socialists are callow youths, half-educated drop-outs, seminary and university students, misfits and outsiders. Such statements used to be justified, but some of the 'callow youths' have grown up, some of the 'half-educated' have caught up on their education, and in place of

students there are now people from both the upper, and the middle, and the peasant class; a Jewish trend has developed within sedition, and men have been joined by women. And whereas the founding fathers of Nihilism had a clergy background, the recent 15 years have not produced a single defendant from a seminary. Since the day of Sergey Nechayev, university students were gradually replaced by trainees of specialized higher educational establishments, who then gave way to individuals of unknown occupation. All the while, the abolition of education benefits and the raising of tuition fees are repeatedly cited as a remedy against sedition by the witch-doctors who forget that its most prominent advocates were neither ‘misfits’, nor ‘outsiders’, nor ‘intellectual proletariat’: the tycoon Lizogub, whose considerable wealth helped to support the sedition crowd, doctor Orest Veimar, with his powerful friends in the upper levels, the emigrant Count Kropotkin, and generals’ children: Osinsky, Leschern von Herzfeld, Batyushkova, Armfeld, as well as the Subbotins, mother and daughter, Perovskaya, and many others” (Gilyarov, 1883: VI-VII).

Yet still, the most profound philosophical exploration of Nihilism in the Russian thought of the day (apart from Dostoevsky’s legacy of novels and diaries) can be found in the numerous works by N.N. Strakhov. His earlier articles on literary nihilism were published in the *Epoha*, but at that time, according to Yu.N. Govorukha-Otrok, they were not broadly discussed. In 1890 they were included in the collection titled “From the History of Literary Nihilism”, and Govorukha-Otrok was sad to note in the *Moskovskie vedomosti* how ‘timely’ this was: “...it seems as if some of the passages were written about the most recent and contemporary literary facts and opinions [...] It is regrettable that in our literature even the obviously ridiculous views are so enduring” (Govorukha-Otrok, 2012: 84).

The issues of political and philosophical Nihilism were the topic of Strakhov’s “Letters about Nihilism” published in Aksakov’s *Rus’* immediately after the “disaster of March 1” in 1881. Arguing to some extent with Katkov and his followers, he stated that revolution did not serve the interests of Russia’s enemies on the outskirts and abroad, but the other way around: “If any hater of Russia actually supplied our anarchists with money or bombs, it only means that he is a servant of Nihilism and works to its benefit, not vice versa, Nihilism does not serve his interests... Among the Poles and the lovers of all things Ukrainian there are Russia’s sworn foes, but what would they be without an alliance with our enemy within?” Strakhov could see that Nihilism was an issue of global history and worldview: “...it is a transcendental sin, the sin of superhuman pride that has swept over the people, it is a hideous perversion of the soul, when vice becomes virtue, bloodshed is seen as a blessing, and destruction is the cornerstone of life”. This diagnosis left the government no room for optimism: “...this disaster will be redeemed neither by reforms, not by the appeasement of the people” (The Rus’. 1881. № 23).

A certain social and political stability in the final years of Alexander III’s reign allowed for some illusions concerning the future among the Conservative circles. The most urgent post-reform issues seemed to have been solved: the Polish Insurrection and the Sedition were destroyed; the ‘national policy’ declared by Katkov and his followers appeared to be equally successful both in the capital cities and on the outskirts. All this, together with the general trends of the day, drew the Conservatives to focus more on economic issues – on the ‘learning of bankers’, an area previously neglected and even disdained by them.

The revolutionary ideology was, of course, changing too. The “pure”, idea-driven Nihilism was becoming a thing of the past as early as in the 1870s, the Narodniki and the Marxists associating themselves with a positive agenda. The Conservatives, who considered Socialism utopian, did not recognize this positive component, and even in their debate with the Marxists continued to use the repertoire of the old anti-Nihilist discourse. What is more, the Conservatives did not develop a unified attitude towards Marxism. For example, Ilovaisky, who belonged to the Conservative-Democratic flank, believed that Marxism was alien to Russia and that its popularity resulted purely from the ‘half-educatedness’ and ‘antinational trends’ among the intelligentsia (The Kremlin’. 1899. №7). According to a later Slavophile writer S.F. Sharapov, on the contrary, “Marxism is our Russian phenomenon. There is something in the Russian soil that is favourable for it, something that gives rise to it” (Sharapov, 2011: 242). But the only thing that he could suggest as a match to the ‘bankrupt’ economic materialism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were the ideas of N.P. Gilyarov-Platonov and V.S. Solovyov, which, to say the least, were not quite compatible even with each other (Sharapov, 2011: 247).

Nevertheless, Sharapov’s criticism of Socialism does deserve our attention. When comparing Christian ethics with Socialist ideas, he found the two ‘completely parallel’: “Take any Christian attribute, switch from plus to minus, and you will have a Socialist equivalent [...] All the terms of one series are homogeneous with the terms of the other series and are mutually negative” (Sharapov, 2011: 281-285). Following Aksakov’s train of thought, Sharapov believed that Socialism would inevitably lead to dictatorship: “Once the supreme regulatory authority of conscience is defied, in order not to end up as a herd of wild beasts humanity has to submit to the external authority – the abstract public volition, the meticulously organized coercion and violence.” (Sharapov, 2011: 283). But of utmost importance for him was this: “The kind-hearted and sincere Russian public is not aware that Socialism is *not a science, not a teaching of any kind*; it is nothing more than a well-known system of dialectics, utterly sophisticated and complicated, and not worth a button, because its starting point contains a primal *lie*; that the power of the social doctrine is not in its implications, which Socialists themselves failed to make, and not in the positive formulas of human co-existence and social structure, which failed to be established and could not be established, but only in negation that finds support in the special *sentiment* of either individuals or social groups; that because of this Socialism has no *creativity*

to it, only *destruction*, and that, finally, as a teaching based on lies, enmity, and hatred, the only logical implication it has is pure anarchism, if one remains solely with destruction, or unheard-of slavery, if one persists in the idle dream and in building the society on the Socialist foundation” (Sharapov, 2011: 274-275).

#### 4. Conclusion

In sum, the debates of the Slavophiles and the Pochvenniki with the Left Radicals continued their earlier disputes with the Westerners. Seeing that Nihilism logically followed from the discontinuity of the national tradition, the Slavophiles, like the other trends within the so-called ‘Russian Conservatism’, believed it to be an attempt at a despotic change of the natural structure of Russian life. Analyzing the similarities and differences of the various trends within the Socialist movement was not considered by them a priority – that is why in their debate with the Marxists in the 1890s, the ‘imitators’ of the Slavophilism used primarily the polemic repertoire of the anti-Nihilist press of the 1860s – 1890s.

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