Global Spencerism

The Communication and Appropriation of a British Evolutionist

Edited by

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Contents

Acknowledgements VII
List of Figures, Graphs and Tables VIII
List of Contributors X

Introduction 1

Bernard Lightman

“What a Go-a-Head People They Are!”: The Hostile Appropriation of
Herbert Spencer in Imperial Russia 13

Michael D. Gordin

Spencer’s Arabic Readers 35

Marwa Elshakry

Spencerism in Japan: Boom and Bust of a Theory 56

G. Clinton Godart

Spencer and Science Education in China 78

Ke Zunke and Li Bin

The Reforming Spencerians: William James, Josiah Royce and John Dewey 103

Mark Francis

Spencer’s American Disciples: Fiske, Youmans, and the Appropriation
of the System 123

Bernard Lightman

The Ideology of the “Survival of the Fittest” during the Porfiriato in
Mexico 149

Rosaura Ruiz Gutiérrez, Ricardo Noguera Solano, and Juan Manuel
Rodríguez Caso

The Rise and Fall of Spencer’s Evolutionary Ideas in Argentina,
1870–1910 173

Adriana Novoa
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Spencerism in Brazil: An Introduction</td>
<td>Heloisa Maria Bertol Domingues</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The Importance of Being Quantified: Herbert Spencer in Liberal Italy, and Beyond</td>
<td>Paola Govoni</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>A ‘Spencerian Moment’ in French Cultural History? Spencer in France (1870–1890)</td>
<td>Nathalie Richard</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Afterword** 286
*Gowan Dawson and Gregory Radick*

**Selected Scholarly Works on Global Spencerism** 297
**Index** 305
“What a Go-a-Head People They Are!”: The Hostile Appropriation of Herbert Spencer in Imperial Russia

Michael D. Gordin

There was no reception of Herbert Spencer in Imperial Russia. Certainly, the English sociologist, philosopher, and universal theoretician never set foot on lands governed by the Romanov Tsars, and he even refused his one chance to be received by Emperor Alexander II in May 1874 at the British Foreign Office, ostensibly because he disliked wearing formal dress. Hence, no literal reception. But also no metaphorical reception in the sense used by intellectual historians and historians of science of yesteryear, a sense that has been largely superseded, with good reason. According to this older model, intellectual creations such as scientific theories were born in one place and then distributed around the globe like so many parasols, unchanged by the pressures of transit and unaffected by the beliefs and commitments of those who received them in Kuala Lumpur or San Francisco. The picture we now have is richer and more multifaceted: a scientific theory is not passively received; it is actively appropriated. That is, specific books are selected to be read or translated because of interests or beliefs of the consumers, and the way the theories are understood depends strongly on prior training and the intellectual practices by which they are adopted and adapted. Herbert Spencer’s work – or, rather, a subset of his

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1 I would like to thank Bernie Lightman, Greg Radick, and Hans Hjermitslev for helpful comments on the framing of this project. Transliteration for all names and terms except common ones (like intelligentsia) follow the modified standard Library of Congress system. All unattributed translations are mine.
3 That this is true even within the same national context has been amply demonstrated, for example, in the case of Britain by James A. Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), and Andrew Warwick, *Masters of Theory: Cambridge and the Rise of Mathematical Physics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). The varieties of appropriation become even more complex and multifaceted when the text/theory/object in question travels beyond national and/or linguistic borders.
work, for who could hope to encompass the entirety of that gargantuan corpus? – met no simple reception by the Russians.

Neither, however, was it simply appropriated. I do not mean that Spencer was not read by the *intellektualistia* of St. Petersburg, Moscow, and places further afield. On the contrary, Herbert Spencer was literally *everywhere* on the pages of the “thick journals” (*tolstye zhurnaly*) that comprised the dominant form of intellectual interchange in the late nineteenth-century Russian Empire, and essentially everything Spencer wrote was translated into Russian, often earlier and more extensively than in any other European or non-European language (see Table 1.1 at the end of this chapter). But Spencer’s ubiquity did not necessarily imply endorsement, or even popularity. Rather, one of the most striking things about the engagement with Spencer in the 1860s and 1870s – the decades after his first translation into Russian, but before the advent of Marxism in Russian space unmanageably complicates the picture – is how negative, even hostile, those intellectual appropriations were.

In this essay, I use the case of Imperial Russian Herbert Spencer (an oxymoron of truly Spencerian grandeur) to explore the phenomenon I call “hostile appropriation.” There are many ways of appropriating a new idea. The simplest, which one used to call “reception,” is to endorse the ideas lock, stock, and barrel, and become a devout “Spencerian.” This did not happen in Petersburg’s dominion, even though *intellektualistia* practices could be enormously faddish, and there were times when you could not (metaphorically) swing a cat without hitting a Left Hegelian, a Right Hegelian, a Darwinist, and a Proudhonist. Nor am I merely referring to what we might think of as “negative appropriation,” whereby individuals read Spencer and found him not to their tastes and set him aside, perhaps with an acerbic review or two. “Hostile appropriation” goes a step farther. In such cases, the new idea was not simply rejected, but the arguments for rejection became a template upon which an alternative vision was built. For many thinkers in Imperial Russia, Herbert Spencer was neither accepted nor rejected, but critiqued so thoroughly that he became the – sometimes unacknowledged – photographic negative of new intellectual visions. Spencer’s work was so copious, and so amenable to different interpretations, that he was hostilely appropriated for diametrically opposite purposes. Here, after a brief description of Spencer’s involvement with Imperial Russia and his initial translation into Russian,⁴ I will focus on two quite different cases: radical

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⁴ In this essay, I restrict the story to the Russian-language engagement with Herbert Spencer. Imperial Russia (much like the Soviet Union and the present-day Russian Federation) was a multilingual state, and there are surely interesting and divergent stories to be gained from examining the publication history and reactions in Polish, Yiddish, or other languages within the Empire.
The Hostile Appropriation of Herbert Spencer in Imperial Russia

populist Nikolai Konstantinovich Mikhailovskii (1842–1904) and conservative liberal Boris Nikolaevich Chicherin (1828–1904). Both used their scorched-earth attacks on Herbert Spencer as springboards to develop alternative visions for Russia’s future, burying him in the process. Spencer’s greatest legacy in this period of Russian history is to be found where he was most absent.

From Herbert to Gerbert

Herbert Spencer did not know much about Imperial Russia, but that did not prevent him from writing about it with great vigor. His sources were mostly indirect, drawing from scholarly literature or travelers’ accounts (usually English or French), with some limited conversations with individuals who had traveled to Russia or (rarely) the occasional Russian acquaintance. (For example, he seems to have adopted without attribution many of the views of Vladimir Ivanovich Kovalevskii on the origins of private property in Russia.) Russia entered most of his publications as a convenient contemporary example of a peasant society undergoing modernization and industrialization, a prominent topic of Western conversations about the country after the February 1861 Emancipation of the serfs. Russia, in Spencer’s account, was an exemplar of a “civilized” polity but of the “militant” type, in some ways a fossil representing the past of other European states such as Prussia, preserved through the vagaries of history for first-hand observation by Western travelers.

Politically, Spencer found the Russian autocracy distasteful, and it is hard to avoid the suspicion that some of his reluctance to attend on the Tsar in 1874 stemmed from these views. His unease, to be sure, reflected his general views about political structure enunciated in many works, but he also opposed specific policies and lent his name to their reversal. Toward the turn of the century, for example, he opposed the intensification of Imperial control over the Grand Duchy of Finland (since 1809 an autonomous state within the Russian


Empire). More controversially, he noted in a letter to G.J. Holyoke in September 1894, “[a]t the instigation of some Jewish periodical I expressed my detestation of the persecutions in Russia, thoughtlessly supposing that my letter would have no further circulation.” As might be expected, the letter was widely distributed and incited angry objections from loyalists, sparking yet another wave of anti-Spencerian comment in Russia.

Not that Spencer really knew about the earlier waves. Spencer’s major awareness of his own status as a thinker within Imperial Russia drew from his knowledge of his shockingly persistent translatability into the Russian language. The enthusiasm of Russian translators for Spencer’s copious output arrived to the author as “an agreeable surprise,” as he wrote in one of the last letters to his father, dated 27 March 1866. The gratifying news of a new edition in a foreign clime was spiced by the frisson of hearing that the translator/editor, Nikolai L’vovich Tiblen (1825-after 1869), had been arrested due to his involvement with the work. (Tiblen asked that Spencer put a paragraph about it in the Times if the case proceeded. The charges were dismissed.) Spencer understood the legal case as attaching to his Essays, specifically to his refutation of the divine right of monarchs, but actually Tiblen’s difficulties were more of the mundane sort: financial arrears and bankruptcy, culminating in the hapless entrepreneur fleeing abroad. (Tiblen was instrumental in distributing a good deal of British intellectual life among the Russians; he had organized translations of Thomas Babington Macaulay in 1863 and Henry Thomas Buckle the following year.) Occasionally, stereotypical stories of Russian repression reached Spencer’s receptive ears. The Times of 28 July 1903 reported that a student had been charged with holding socialist views during his interview for admission to university based on his having been observed, when he was fifteen, with a copy of Spencer’s Sociology. This might have happened, of course, but it is difficult to ascertain the reliability of such reports. Their historical value is more to illustrate Spencer’s imagined understanding of the vitality of his thought in an autocratic society. (Despite his objections to socialism,

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Spencer did not comment on the political allegiances of the ostensible martyrs to Spencerianism.)

When Russians read Spencer, they read him in the context of a vibrant and flourishing world of print, one with characteristics distinct from those of other European polities. Rapid discontinuities hit Russian printers and readers in the 1860s, due to the series of administrative measures known as the Great Reforms. With the Emancipation of the serfs in 1861, both administrative decrees and primary schooling extended into the countryside, producing a small but significant expansion of readership. University reforms in 1863 enabled many individuals from lower ranks of the hierarchical Russian social order to participate in higher education, expanding the pool of readers, authors, and (importantly) translators of foreign works. Changes in the civil service, military service, and governance also promoted literacy and expanded readership; coupled with an easing of the censorship regime from preliminary to punitive – that is, allowing periodicals to publish articles without pre-clearance and finding promoters of seditious or libelous material only afterward – in 1865, this generated a sudden expansion of the number of readers and the kinds of books and especially periodicals that could be directed at them.12

The periodicals demand particular attention, because the great majority of the Russian readership encountered intellectual life through them. The primary vehicle here were the “thick journals,” fat monthly periodicals (usually circa 300 pages an issue) which published political commentary, book reviews, historical essays, philosophy articles, and serialized fiction. (With the exception of Ivan Turgenev’s Fathers and Sons and Nikolai Gogol’s Dead Souls, every major novel of the century was first published in installments in thick journals.) People subscribed to (often several) thick journals based on aesthetic preferences and political leanings, and in the process were routinely exposed to a wide array of genres and ideas across a gigantic country with very limited booksellers but a relatively robust postal system. The system continued to flourish after 1865 while facing stiffer competition from an expanding newspaper market. Editors’ need for content to fill each issue summoned into being a Grub Street of students, radicals, and moonlighting civil servants who wrote reviews or translated Western European fashions into Russian, and discussions of contemporary science were certainly included. Building on the demand for new intellectual stimulation triggered by thick journals, publishers generated books

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12 On these transformations, see especially Jeffrey Brooks, When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861–1917 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); and Charles A. Ruud, Fighting Words: Imperial Censorship and the Russian Press, 1804–1906 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009 [1982]).
from the content that first appeared in them, and then were reviewed in the same, creating a tight-knit culture of reading and writing.\footnote{On these journals, see Deborah A. Martinsen, ed., \textit{Literary Journals in Imperial Russia} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). On seriality and literature in the Russian context, see the classic study by William Mills Todd III, \textit{Fiction and Society in the Age of Pushkin: Ideology, Institutions, and Narrative} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).}

Tiben's edition appeared as stand-alone volumes, but it had been primed by mentions of Spencer in the thick journals, and in the end represented only the beginning of a wave of translations of almost everything Spencer wrote. Tiblen intended to publish seven volumes of Spencer's collected works, appearing serially in 1866, but only the first two appeared (a common enough outcome for such ventures, especially for the unlucky Tiblen). The contents indicate both the diversity of Spencer's oeuvre as well as the chaos that appeared before his Russian readers: the first volume contained Spencer's shorter essays (“Progress: Its Law and Cause,” 1857; “The Philosophy of Style,” 1857; “The Ultimate Laws of Physiology,” 1857; “The Origin and Function of Music,” 1857; “Use and Beauty,” 1854; “The Development Hypothesis,” 1852–4; “The Sources of Architectural Types,” 1852–4; “The Theory of Tears and Laughter,” 1852; “Gracefulness,” 1852–4; “The Valuation of Evidence,” 1853; “Personal Beauty,” 1852–4; “The Use of Anthropomorphism,” 1852; “Railway Morals and Railway Policy,” 1854; “The Genesis of Science,” 1854; “Manners and Fashion,” 1854; and “The Social Organism,” 1860); the second volume included “The Physiology of Laughter,” 1860; “Bain on the Emotions and the Will,” 1860; “The Morals of Trade,” 1860; “State-Tamperings with Money and Banks,” 1858; “Prison Ethics,” 1860; and so on. Also available in Russian were \textit{First Principles}, 1862; \textit{The Principles of Biology}, 1864–7, and \textit{Education: Intellectual, Moral and Physical}, 1861 (the translation of which included \textit{The Nebular Hypothesis} and \textit{Illogical Geology}).\footnote{Gerbert Spenser, \textit{Sobranie sochinenii v 7-mi tomakh. Nauchnye, politcheskie i filosofskie opyty}, t. 1, perevod pod redaktsiei N.L. Tiblena (St Petersburg: Tip. N. Tiblena i ko., 1866).} In 1864, \textit{The Classification of Sciences and Reasons for Dissenting from the Philosophy of M. Comte} had been published as separate pamphlets. Spencermania continued into the 1870s. As Spencer wrote to his American acolyte Edward L. Youmans on 28 December 1875: “A professor at Kiev” – Spencer couldn't quite make out the name – “proposes, in conjunction with his colleagues and pupils, to translate the \textit{Descriptive Sociology}. He tells me, to my surprise, that all my books have now been translated into Russian with the exception of the \textit{Descriptive Sociology}, which will thus soon be added to the list.”\footnote{Reproduced in Herbert Spencer, \textit{An Autobiography}, 2 vols (New York: D. Appleton, 1904), II: 338.} Two years later, having apparently
completely forgotten about the offer, he wrote again to Youmans with news that the translation had arrived. It was all very impressive: “What a go-a-head people they are!”

And so Herbert Spencer became widely known as Gerbert Spenser (there is no “h” in Russian). Of course, no book ever arrives shorn of context, as readers encounter the work in a penumbra of other books they consider to be related, in addition to the cultural milieu which shapes how they interpret the book. Translations, being books, are no different, and “Gerbert Spenser” was read within a matrix of writings which decisively affected his hostile appropriation. For while I maintain that Spencer was almost universally cited and interpreted as an (only slightly exaggerated) strawman, it matters very much that these Russian thinkers picked Spencer and not someone else as the figure against which they built up their own narratives about politics and society.

Two characteristics of Spencer facilitated this appropriation. The first was the unassailable fact that he was English. English thought was decisively à la mode among the intelligentsia and bureaucrats in the wake of the Russian defeat by the British in the Crimean War (1854–1856), the proximate impetus for the Great Reforms, and Spencer also fit nicely into pre-existing excitement about Henry Buckle’s *History of Civilization in England* and the growing hubbub in the 1860s about the evolutionary thought of Charles Darwin. As has been well described by historian Daniel Todes, Darwin was read by Russians voraciously but with moderate skepticism, since the overly fecund tropics that provided the bulk of his evidence for the Malthusian trap of natural selection seemed ill-suited to the geography of the underpopulated steppes. The point, however, is the deep engagement with Darwin’s ideas, as well as the respectful appropriation; Spencer would be different. Mention of Darwin brings up the second feature of Spencer’s thought that picked him out for Russian commentators: his thoroughgoing articulation of a theory of “progress.” As mentioned earlier, in 1865, as part of the Great Reforms, Russian censorship was slightly eased, but not to the point where thoroughgoing political reform could be openly discussed. As a result, conversations about such topics took place through what has been termed “Aesopian language,” whereby coded metaphors

and allusions allowed censors (who obviously understood the code) to authorize interesting works while protecting themselves from repercussions should the approved texts later be interpreted by police as seditious. “Progress” had, since the longstanding Russian engagement with G.F.W. Hegel’s thought (dating from at least the 1830s), served as precisely such an Aesopian code word, soon joined by “evolution.” Spencer – sometimes alongside Darwin, and sometimes in his stead – represented for the growing but still largely elite and urbanized reading public an excellent foil to frame discussions of the most sensitive topics of the day.

One final point about how the Russians read Spencer before turning to our two examples: Spencer was uniformly interpreted within the positivist tradition, although the man himself vehemently objected to this characterization when it cropped up in Western contexts. For Russians, “positivism” meant, almost interchangeably, Auguste Comte, John Stuart Mill, and Herbert Spencer. The collapsing of Spencer especially into Comte was exacerbated by the fact that, during the Imperial period, the Tiblen edition of Spencer’s earlier works and the later translations of the British thinker were the main access to any stadial theory of history based on purportedly scientific observations. Although Spencer protested that his evolutionism was distinct from Comte’s three phases (theological, metaphysical, positive), the second-hand reports of Comte arrived in Russia filtered through a public that had already read the more widely available Spencer (Comte’s Cours de philosophie positive was not translated until 1899 – probably a consequence of the fact that Russian intelligentsy were more able to handle the French original than anything written in English). Officially, the Holy Synod, Russia’s established Orthodox Church, opposed positivism, understood as a manifestation of the European crisis of materialism, although it is likely that ecclesiastical objections intensified interest in Spencer rather than warning readers away.


The Hostile Appropriation of Herbert Spencer in Imperial Russia

And so Spencer was read, in almost all ideological circles of the tiny stratum of educated Russians, as being both a representative of English thought and an apostle of one variant of “progress,” and therefore, necessarily, a positivist. Yet the striking fact remains that, according to historian of Russian science Alexander Vucinich, “The Spencerian theory of the survival of the fittest as a key mechanism of social evolution did not have a single supporter among the leading Russian sociologists.”

It is not enough to point to the absence of explicit advocates; one must go further and explore the complex topography of the rejection. As one Soviet intellectual historian observed: “[I]t is not easy to judge about [Spencer’s] real influence, about how far his readers went in the pursuit of his fundamental ideas, whether they shared these ideas or selected from his work whatever corresponded to their own moods.”

Such a selective reading is the essence of all appropriation, given in this instance an additional wrinkle in that Spencer – unlike Comte and especially unlike Darwin – was predominantly read in the negative-template mode.

Spencer among the Populists

Although essentially unknown to intellectual historians outside of specialists on late Imperial Russia, Nikolai Mikhailovskii was one of the most important and consequential social theorists of the late nineteenth century (see Fig. 1.1). He set out in St. Petersburg to study to be a mining engineer in the early 1860s, only to be swept up by the intellectual ferment surrounding the atmosphere of the Great Reforms. Drawn to political and social commentary, he began work as a bookbinder, which cemented connections with the publishing world, enabled him to read more widely in French and German, and connected him as a tutor to wealthy young foreigners. He soon became a regular contributor to, and editor of, several thick journals, especially Notes of the Fatherland (Otechestvennye Zapiski) and the Northern Courier (Severnii Vestnik).

Mikhailovskii’s reputation as a leading theorist of the radical movement known as the narodniki – often translated as “Populists” in English from the Russian word narod, meaning “people,” but not to be confused with American or Western European electoral populism – was made by a series of essays he composed in the late 1860s and early 1870s to articulate his “subjective method” in sociology and a voluntarist conception of political transformation, including

21 Vucinich, Social Thought in Tsarist Russia, 236.
22 Utkina, Positivizm, antropologicheskii materializm i nauka v Rossii, 52.
23 Billington, Mikhailovsky and Russian Populism, 20.
“Darwin’s Theory and Social Science,” “The Analogical Method in Social Science,” and “Louis Blanc’s Philosophy of History.” The first of these pieces, published in 1869 in *Fatherland Notes*, was entitled “What Is Progress?” It was a massive and detailed review of volume one of the Tiblein edition of Herbert Spencer’s essays.

Mikhailovskii aggressively and uncompromisingly panned it, but in the process “made the name of Herbert Spencer a household word in the Russian intellectual community.” Mikhailovskii began with an exposition and then demolition of Spencer’s aesthetic theory – a seemingly innocuous choice in other contexts, but not in Russia, where literary critic Vissarion Belinskii (1811–1848) had transformed aesthetic criticism into a powerful Aesopian vehicle for political commentary. From this example, Mikhailovskii set out the task of his enormous essay:

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24 Vucinich, *Social Thought in Tsarist Russia*, 21.
25 Vucinich, *Social Thought in Tsarist Russia*, 44.
The reader sees that the entirety of Spencer’s argumentation does not sustain even the slightest criticism, and that here one cannot even talk about the evaluation of his theoretical principles, because their logical supports give way all by themselves. And if, in the ten fascicles of his collected works which have so far appeared in Russian, there was nothing besides such proofs and propositions, then I, it stands to reason, would not think it necessary to speak about him. But I intend to speak, and to speak at length.26

Spencer was worth attacking because, despite his misconceptions, he was “a mind of great caliber; one of those all-encompassing synthetic minds, which from time to time introduce a spirit of unity and life in the disparate facts achieved by several generations of less gifted and even completely ungifted toilers of science.”27 Mikhailovskii then proceeded to outline Spencer’s sociological theory, “the Achilles heel of his philosophy,”28 with a lengthy detour through an exposition of Comte’s framework (as well as Mill, Darwin, and Buckle), in order to articulate his “subjective sociology,” whose “negative frame of reference was provided by the sociological and historical conceptions of Spencer, first of all his theory of progress,” as noted by the most prominent intellectual historian of Russian Populism.29

Mikhailovskii’s engagement with Spencer stemmed from a concern he had with Darwinism’s implications for the boundary between biology and sociology. He appreciated that Darwin’s picture of biological evolution required randomness; at the same time, he thought humans’ capacity to develop intentional plans – and in particular the goal of progress in those plans – meant that non-directed evolution could not account for social change. Therefore, he felt compelled to engage with Spencer’s pre-Darwinian articulations of purposive evolution, and especially Spencer’s dominant metaphor of society as an organism – which represented “progress” as increasing levels of social differentiation – and posit an alternative. Out of his detailed and sensitive reading of Spencer, Mikhailovskii argued that the social sciences functioned on a completely

28 Mikhailovskii, “Chto takoe progress?,” 16.
different plane from the natural sciences, and one could not be reduced to the other. (Later, the Marxist philosophy of science known as dialectical materialism would argue something similar from different principles.) Further, whereas Spencer thought sociologists should study social change with the same level of disinterestedness as physicists study molecules, Mikhailovskii contended that moral values could not be dissociated from facts, the social sciences were necessarily incapable of being approached objectively because of the omnipresence of unconscious emotions and conscious ideologies, and that individuals could override the putative “laws of history.”

These notions formed the intellectual core of Populism, which later became associated with political terrorism and assassinations in late Imperial Russia. Its roots, however, lay in Mikhailovskii’s school of social criticism designed to move beyond mechanistic Western European sociology and to harness the tremendous energy of peasants’ willpower (*volia*). Along with other important thinkers, like Nikolai Chernyshevskii and Petr Tkachev, Mikhailovskii maintained that the social conditions of Russia, especially the peasant commune, endowed Russia with the sociological infrastructure to leapfrog over capitalism (with all its horrors of proletarianization and mass impoverishment) directly into socialism. If progress were defined as greater social differentiation (*à la* Spencer’s evolutionary organismal analogy), then exploitative capitalism was inevitable and specialization of labor was to be welcomed. If progress could be defined through subjective value judgments that emphasized the greater integration of society, rather than its atomization, then a harmonious social utopia might be achieved without a capitalist phase. The radicals, in other words, used the critique of Spencer in order to delink Darwin from social change, and thus maintain their progressive credentials as scientifically-minded Darwinists without having to compromise on their voluntarist political program. An attack on Spencer could serve multiple different ends.

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Mr. Chicherin Objects

One of those ends, in the hands of Boris Chicherin (see Fig. 1.2), was the anti-revolutionary goal of liberal change through the conservative channels of the extant Russian state. Born in 1828, Chicherin was a generation older than Mikhailovskii and – in the classic Turgenevesque conflict between “fathers” and “children” – belonged without question to a cohort raised on debates about Hegelian necessity and the laws of history rather than the willful scientism of these “men of the sixties” (shestidesiatniki). Chicherin is one of those Zelig-like figures who shows up in almost every episode in the intellectual history of Imperial Russia, and he published broadly in an astonishing array of fields, ranging from theology to chemistry (he postulated a mathematized formulation of the periodic system of chemical elements). Here are some of his publications: State Institutions of Russia in the 17th Century (1856), On Popular Government (1866), History of Political Doctrines (5 volumes, 1869–1902), Science and Religion (1879), Mysticism and Science (1880), Property and the State (2 volumes, 1882–1883), The Positive Philosophy and the Unity of Science (1892), The Foundations of Logic and Metaphysics (1894). It is a range reminiscent of someone like Herbert Spencer. The connection is not, I insist, accidental, although it has long gone unnoticed as one of the most sustained instances of hostile appropriation of Spencer in Imperial Russia.

Chicherin had moved to Moscow in 1844 and quickly became part of a classic circle of “Westernizers,” thinkers who saw the future of Russia lying in its transformation into a Western European state as opposed to the so-called “Slavophiles” – both monikers were originally terms of abuse adopted gleefully by the intended targets – who advocated a future built out of particularly Slavic traditions of the Russian peasantry. Despite their mutual sniping, both groups focused their intellectual efforts on the same goal: the end of serfdom. For the Westernizers, serfdom held Russia back in a medieval stupor; for the Slavophiles, it oppressed the peasants and dampened the invigorating Slavic spirit. Chicherin drank deeply of the Hegelian brew of the epoch, and quickly became known as a pioneering legal thinker and historian.

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Figure 1.2  Portrait of Boris N. Chicherin by Vladimir O. Sherwood, late nineteenth century.
His historical work has attracted the greatest scholarly attention, especially his 1858 thesis that the peasant commune \((\text{obshchina})\), which both Slavophiles and later Populists held to be the seed of a renovated Russia, was not an autochthonous Slavonic institution but was rather imposed by the Muscovite state in the seventeenth century in an effort to more efficiently collect taxes.\(^\text{34}\)

Immensely controversial at the time, Chicherin’s general thesis is mostly accepted today, and it remains a landmark in the intellectual development of the “State School” of Russian historiography (so dubbed because it attributes most historical developments to top-down actions of the state). Chicherin continued his scholarship at the law faculty of Moscow University, eventually resigning with several colleagues in 1868 in a dispute over state intervention against academic freedom. (He also served briefly as mayor of Moscow in 1882, resigning for similar reasons.) His early career as a self-professed “liberal” and interlocutor of such giants of Russian thought as Alexander Herzen has focused commentators on his writings of the 1850s and early 1860s, when he theorized the legal structures of peasant Emancipation (although without participating in it directly, opting instead to spend the early years of the Great Reforms on a European tour). As a liberal (however conservative in approach), Chicherin stood almost alone for a political position of moderate reform in an intellectual hothouse dominated by revolutionaries and reactionaries.\(^\text{35}\) It was a lonely spot.

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What the scholarly focus on the “early Chicherin” ignores is his persistent, decades-long engagement with the works of Herbert Spencer, perhaps the second greatest vehicle for the development of his thought next to Hegel – although this time as a photographic negative.36 Starting in the 1860s, Chicherin began to refer to Spencer in his many publications, but always as a strawman, an alternative view that he would proceed to demolish before erecting his own picture.37 For example, in his 1879 book Science and Religion, Chicherin devoted a crucial segment to a systematic dismantling of aspects of Spencer’s project of synthesizing the world under a principle of the unity of force, dismissing such an approach as devolving into “pure materialism” and resulting in “a scandalous misuse of the experimental method.”38 Chicherin also believed Spencer’s notion of progress through differentiation justified a caste-bound society as the highest form of human development, concluding that “[b]oth logic and experience equally come out as losers in this theory, which presents a brave attempt to unify the world’s phenomena without any firm point of support, both in terms of speculation and in its proposed data.”39

That work was focused on the intellectual and theological bankruptcy of positivism, considered from an idealist Hegelian standpoint, and it is not surprising that Spencer would be a target for Chicherin’s ire. More intriguing is that even in the area of political science and sociology, Chicherin – no friend of the Populists’ subjectivism – point-by-point constructed his own interpretation against Herbert Spencer’s. “Only by means of the most strained analogies and omission of the most essential indications,” he noted in his 1882–3 textbook Property and the State, “is it possible to forcibly bring together both sorts of laws into one category. That is precisely what we find in Spencer.”40 Chicherin devoted most of his critique to Spencer’s 1857 article “Progress: Its Law and Cause.” After articulating his opponent’s views, in a classic instance of hostile appropriation, he proceeded to build up his own in mirror-image: “Such is Spencer’s theory. Upon a superficial glance it appears rather well-rounded and consistent. But if we look at it a little more closely, we see that it contains nothing besides entirely arbitrarily selected facts and conclusions, in which one

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36 For example, V.D. Zor’kin mentions Spencer only once in passing in his biography of Chicherin, in the context of Mill, Adam Smith, and Wilhelm von Humboldt. Zor’kin, Chicherin (Moscow: Iuridicheskaia literatura, 1984), 41.

37 There was, for example, no reference to Spencer in Chicherin’s earlier essays, collected in Neskol’ko sovremennykh voprosov (Moscov: GPiB, 2002).

38 B.N. Chicherin, Nauka i religiia (Moscow: Tip. Martynova i Ko., 1879), 494–495.

39 Chicherin, Nauka i religiia, 497.

40 B.N. Chicherin, Sobstvennost’ i gosudarstvo (St. Petersburg: Izd. RKHG, 2005 [1882–3]), 301.
can find everything except logic. Let us follow it step by step.”41 We end up with a perspective that rejected many of the foundational postulates of English liberalism in favor of greater state involvement in managing the economy and the polity – yet still “liberal” for its Russian context. A similar account also appears in Chicherin’s 1900 textbook Philosophy of Law. (Textbooks are an excellent place to observe the kind of hostile appropriation I am describing, since these are systematic expositions of an entire field which necessarily have to introduce countervailing views as well as the author’s own.) Here, Spencer was addressed not through one sustained engagement, but by repeated jabs, in part a response to the increased translation of Spencer’s work in the 1880s and 1890s within the proliferating universe of professional legal journals (wherein the influence of Mill and Comte was markedly downplayed, and that of the neo-Kantians emphasized).42

**Conclusion**

As can be seen from this brief survey, while Chicherin could not disagree more vocally with the specific projects of Mikhailovskii and his ilk, the two camps were of one accord in wanting to be as anti-Spencerian as possible. Given the copiousness of Spencer’s oeuvre and his occasional tendency to stake out inconsistent positions, being “non-Spencer” could mean a wide variety of things. That said, the emphasis on how much some Russians hated Spencer might make it sound like he found no sympathetic ears, and I do not want to give that impression. Nonetheless, much like his detractors, those rare supporters of Spencer were highly selective in what they read and praised, and even then their approbation was hardly sufficient to merit calling them “Spencerians.”

The only significant work of Spencer’s which seems to have met with a consistent degree of admiration in Russia was his 1861 *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical* (which appeared in a staggering five different translations before 1900; see Table 1.1). This was hardly his most important work from either a sociological or evolutionary point of view, but writers as disparate as Fedor Dostoevskii and Anton Chekhov wrote positive assessments in their notes concerning Spencer’s advocacy of co-education and his opposition to rote

41 Chicherin, *Sobstvennost’ i gosudarstvo*, 751.
learning.\textsuperscript{43} (Leo Tolstoy, on the other hand, remained resolutely anti-Spencerian.)\textsuperscript{44} Spencer’s thought had other brief renaissances as well. In 1885 Aleksandr S. Lappo-Danilevskii, soon to become a leading historian, devoted a whole year along with the Scientific Literary Society at St. Petersburg University to intensive study of Spencer’s sociology and psychology.\textsuperscript{45} Later still, prominent Constitutional Democrat Pavel Miliukov on several occasions referred to both Spencer’s and Comte’s ideas in articulating his commitment to democracy and social reform after the 1905 Revolution.\textsuperscript{46} None of these invocations of Spencer had the same duration and intellectual intensity as the hostile appropriation of the 1860s and 1870s.

Had Spencer known about them, two final positive interactions with his work on the part of Russian authors would have gratified him deeply. First, in the dispute between Spencer and August Weismann in 1893 about the inheritance of acquired characteristics, Russian naturalists and intelligentsia tended to side with Spencer, who argued that there was some evidence of neo-Lamarckian heredity (or at least that Weismann had not proved their absence).\textsuperscript{47} This is a matter of some interest given the later intense propagation of neo-Lamarckian ideas in the Soviet Union under the auspices of Trofim Lysenko. But perhaps the gentlest and least controversial was the proliferation of sympathetic obituaries that heralded the Englishman’s passing in December 1903. Bromides and platitudes about the encyclopedism of Spencer’s thought and the ambition of his synthesis were to be found in several intellectual journals, but without critical engagement with (or even exposition of) his central ideas.\textsuperscript{48} In the ensuing months, commentary dwindled to a trickle. The legacies of Chicherin’s conservative liberalism on the one hand, and much more Mikhailovskii’s Populism on the other, would be of greater import. Hostile appropriation prevailed.

\begin{thebibliography}
\bibitem{44}Shkurinov, \textit{Pozitivizm v Rossii xix veka}, 237.
\bibitem{45}Vucinich, \textit{Social Thought in Tsarist Russia}, 111.
\bibitem{48}Much is made of these obituaries in V.A. Bazhanov, \textit{Vospriiatie Britanskoi sotsial’no-filosofskoi mysli v Rossii (xix-nachalo xx vv.)} (Ul’ianovsk, UlGU, 2005), 29–40, although the publications invoked were relatively marginal to the dominant intellectual conversations in contemporary Russia.
\end{thebibliography}
Given the apparent ubiquity of Spencer’s thought in the latter half of the nineteenth century in the intelligentsia publications of Petersburg and Moscow, it is striking that the topic has attracted so little attention from historians. At times, Spencer even seems invisible. For example, in a 1978 history book entitled The Positivist Theory of Law in Russia, Herbert Spencer was not referenced even once – despite the evidence of significant citations we have seen on Chicherin’s part (who played a large role in the study).⁴⁹ As with all historical questions about absences, one can only speculate, but it seems that there are two dominant explanations for the blinders concerning Spencer’s appropriation in Imperial Russia. The first is that to the extent that historians have examined the kinds of questions to which Spencer devoted the lion’s share of his corpus – evolution, social organization, progress – they have interpreted Russian intellectuals’ engagement with those questions as creative readings of either Charles Darwin or Karl Marx. In this, they are no doubt at least partly correct, but it seems to me highly likely that Russians’ readings of Spencer colored their engagement with those better-studied authors, and also certainly possible that elliptical references that have been taken as relating to Darwin or Marx were sometimes references to Spencer. Spencer’s very proximity to these two giants obscures his centrality.

The second and final point concerns the challenges of writing histories of “hostile appropriations.” If individuals had waved banners proclaiming “I am a Spencerian,” it would be much easier to locate them and tell the story of an active and vigorous positive reception of Herbert Spencer’s corpus. When a scholar is appropriated largely in the context of being a universal punching bag, however, the only way to see his or her impact is to read the footnotes carefully, and see who is cited and in what context. These appropriations do not usually show up in indices or bibliographic searches, as some of the citations can be allusive. But we should look harder for these negative appropriations, because it seems entirely reasonable that not only is the phenomenon of building one’s own theories on vanquished rubble of an interlocutor a common practice, but it might even be the more frequent form of appropriation of intellectual legacies. Spencer, even when honored more in the breach than the observance, has much to teach us still.

⁴⁹ V.D. Zor’kin, Pozitivistskaia teoriia prava v Rossii (Moscow: Izd. Moskovskogo universiteta, 1978).
Table 1.1 Translations of Herbert Spencer’s works into Russian, 1866–1900 (excluding summaries and simplified expositions, and reprints)

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