

Humanitarian Populism¹

REVIEW OF: ELY C. (2022) *RUSSIAN POPULISM: A HISTORY*, BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING. 254 P.

Alexander M. Nikulin

Candidate of Economic Sciences, Head of the Center for Agrarian Studies,
Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration;
Head of the Chayanov Research Center,
Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences
Address: Prosp. Vernadskogo, 82, Moscow, Russia, 119571
E-mail: harmina@yandex.ru

Irina V. Trotsuk

DSc (Sociology), Professor, Sociology Chair, RUDN University;
Senior Research Fellow, Center for Agrarian Studies,
Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration
Address: Miklukho-Maklaya Str., 6, Moscow, Russia, 117198
E-mail: irina.trotsuk@yandex.ru

Populism is both a well-known and an extremely vague term² defined as an ideology, a strategy, a discourse, or a political logic³ appealing to real or imagined majority (the ‘people’) in the fight for political, institutional power with authoritarian methods to wield it. It has been said that “Populism has been stretched so far in some scholarly usage — and in much journalistic discussion and public commentary — that it risks dissolving as a distinct object of analysis”.⁴ However, there is scholarly agreement on the analytical core of populism — an idealized conception of the people’s community — and on two general approaches to the study of populism, those of the theoretical (historical and contemporary), and the analysis of specific manifestations of populism. Perhaps, most works on populism focus on its specific cases rather than on theoretical discussions about its essence, and the reviewed book definitely contributes to the first — the historical — approach.

Christopher Ely defines his book as having a pedagogical purpose: “Having taught the history of Imperial Russia now for more than a quarter century, I have come to recognize just how alien that history can be to my contemporaries... A great wealth of material on Russian populism exists on library bookshelves, and indeed on the shelves of my own office, but for undergraduates, some of it is lengthy, some out of print, and some overly technical or specialized. Not having found a relatively brief but comprehensive introduction to the topic, that is what I have tried to provide here. Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of

1. The article was prepared in the framework of a research grant funded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation (grant ID: 075-15-2022-326).

2. Panizza F. (Ed.) (2005) *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, London: Verso, p. 1.

3. Moffitt B. (2016) *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 5.

4. Brubaker R. (2020) Populism and nationalism. *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 2, no 1, p. 53.

the book, my sole aim in writing it has been to produce an accessible overview for the use of students and those unfamiliar with the history of Imperial Russia” (p. viii). Therefore, as primarily a textbook on the history of Russian populism for students of American universities, this book presents an easy-to-read (in terms of the academic requirements) and a fascinating story, which makes it a kind of ‘fundamentals of populism’ for all intellectuals interested in the history of Russia’s populist searches in the last two centuries.

In the Preface, the author warns the reader that he uses the term ‘populism’ in its broadest sense, rather than as a name of any particular doctrine: “This book defines Russian populism in very broad terms. It goes back as far as the late eighteenth century and extends into the first half of the twentieth century, and it runs roughshod over any narrow definition of *narodnichestvo*, accepting populism as a broad enough phenomenon to include room for all those members of the intelligentsia fascinated by the *narod*, from conservative Slavophiles to radical socialists” (p. ix). Such an approach is justified for summarizing the typical hopes and ideas that determined both the interests and anxieties of the majority of the Russian population in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Ely prevents any possible criticism by emphasizing his modest ambition and inevitable limitations of simplification (implicit for all broad terms and definitions): “This book does not seek to break any new ground in our understanding of Russian populism. If anything it is an attempt to convey to undergraduate readers the fascination I myself developed about the populist movement as a student... Unfortunately, writing a textbook is... “an exercise in gross over-simplification”. The abundance and complexity of the materials I have tried to distill into accessible form here necessitates a great loss of subtlety, not to mention a great opportunity for mistakes and inaccuracies” (ibid.).

The author admits that populism can be both right-wing, conservative, and left-wing. Different, sometimes quite opposite political directions of Russian populism are described in the book: “What was Russian populism? Unfortunately, no simple definition — no matter how nuanced and multifaceted — could capture the rich, variegated, long-lasting, self-contradictory, and endlessly disputed nature of this phenomenon, a phenomenon that manifested itself at times as a political movement, at times as an articulated ideology, at times as a form of artistic expression, and at times as little more than a cast of thought” (p. 2). Throughout the book, the author emphasizes the specifics of Russian populism as an attempt to overcome the deep social-class split of tsarist Russia — into a privileged, educated, polite society (social elites) and a poor, illiterate people: “‘the common people’ or ‘ordinary folk’... the majority of the *narod* consisted of (mostly) poor, (mostly) illiterate rural farmers, most of whom were legally designated as members of the peasant estate” (ibid.).

The author makes instructive remarks about the fundamental differences between American and Russian populism in the late 19th century, summarized in the Conclusion. American populism, which was on the rise in the 1890s, had its deepest roots in farming communities. It was primarily populism growing ‘from below’, that is, from the pragmatic democratic foundations of rural America: “American populism, like Russian, was agrarian. Like Russian populism it too sought to lift up common rural folk to a higher

status by addressing problems of social inequality. Populism in the United States was therefore considered to be on the left of the political spectrum just as Russian populism was. But the similarities end there. Most importantly, the American version of populism was a movement that emerged from within the rural community itself, among people who had electoral power and used that power to create a new political party to advance their interests in opposition to the existing parties” (p. 215–216).

Russian populism was developed primarily by the highly educated in cities and suburban estates. In its essence, it was populism ‘from above’ — rather speculative and often detached from the real people’s lives: “The Russian populists... hailed from educated society; they were members of an intelligentsia that stood apart from the people, the *narod*, whom they considered to be the proper inheritors of Russia’s destiny” (p. 216). At the same time, Russian populism often showed amazing sacrifice and self-denial.

Ely considers the differences between Russian and American populism by comparing the two countries’ great 19th century populist poets believed to have captured the spirit of their societies: “Both Nekrasov and Whitman at first were accused of introducing vulgarity into the high art of poetry, both understood their work as an evocation of the entire national experience, both hoped their poetry would speak to the masses, and both were in fact read almost exclusively by intellectual elites... Whitman... seeks both to interest readers in his uniqueness and to convince them that he and they are one and the same. Nekrasov... lamented the fact that he was unable to do more for the *narod*, but he congratulated himself in his outsider capacity for having been able to serve them by finding a voice to ‘sing your suffering’” (p. 218).

On the one hand, the author repeatedly emphasizes that the radical populists were inclined to see the source of a bright future for Russia and a possible path for the rest of the world in the special nature of peasant culture. The radical populists were convinced that the peasantry possessed a special communal and revolutionary instinct which would eventually manifest in the overthrow of tsarist power and in the victory of socialism in Russia. On the other hand, the author admits that there were both a radical populist path and an opposite populist belief in the peasantry as the guardians of Russia’s Orthodox, conservative social order. The author refers to the authoritative opinion of the Russian social philosopher Georgy Fedotov, who quite reasonably included some liberals, conservatives, and even the last tsar of the Romanov dynasty Nicholas II in the list of Russian populists: “*Narodnichestvo* colored many sections of Russian political life. The Marxists and Westernizers remained outside this trend, but there were *Narodniks* among the liberals of the *Kadet* party as well as among the ultra-reactionary Union of the Russian People... Least of all is one prepared to meet *Narodniks* among the Russian bureaucracy, and yet there was a whole department of the government, the Ministry of Agriculture, which was infected with populist tendencies” (p. 224)⁵.

A special cross-cutting theme of the book is the relationship between populism and Marxism in Russia. The author argues that, in general, in the perspective of Russian

5. The author refers to: Fedotov G. P. (1942) The religious sources of Russian populism. *Russian Review*, vol. 1, no 2, p. 27.

Marxism in the late 19th century, populism was a version of Russian agrarian socialism which strived to acquire its basis in the peasants' rural worlds, while Marxist socialism proceeded from the development of industrial capitalism and the growth of the urban working class. He writes that "The Marxist version, first expressed in the 1890s, equated populism (of the revolutionary type) with any kind of Russian agrarian socialism — i.e., socialism based on rural, peasant institutions — that pre-dated the late-nineteenth-century advent of Marxism in Russia... The Marxist equation of populism with agrarian socialism was later accepted implicitly by many non-Marxist scholars and became the most common way of thinking about populism. The idea of populism as agrarian socialism has the advantage of providing historians with a clear target of analysis, but unfortunately it excludes all non-socialist expressions of populism (of the more general kind), and thereby distorts and minimizes populism's historical relevance" (p. 6).

Thus, a century and a half ago, the 'Russian peasant' was at the center of the disputes about the past and present of Russia, its fate, mission, and national character. Like the mythical Proteus, the 'Russian peasant' was constantly transforming, like into the 'bearded Orthodox man' for Konstantin Leontiev, who defended and expanded the borders of the Russian tsardom; into an embodiment of the communal spirit for the Slavophiles; into the driving force of the Russian history, which could revive even an exhausted Europe, for Alexander Herzen; into a representative of the God-bearing people for Fyodor Dostoevsky, and so on. The author refers to Hans Rogger's description of the Russian educated society's obsession with the *narod*: "Russians, insofar as they tried to arrive at a definition of the national character and its unique elements, had in one way or another to come to terms with the peasants as a phenomenon of Russian reality"⁶. However, the author argues that "while Rogger's list is long, he actually neglects to mention several other important peasant-centered movements and philosophies like those of Russian anarchists, the peasant Tolstoyans, and the Socialist Revolutionary Party" (p. 6). Thus, until now, the broad interpretations of Russian populism paradoxically bring together violent political antagonists, and add some mystic features to the Russian peasant's image in order to place it in the center of the opposing ideological directions.

The author explains his approach to populism metaphorically with a ring of concentric circles, i.e., he "considers Russian populism not as a temporal phenomenon, unfolding over time, but spatially" (p. 10). Since "the metaphor of concentric circles reminds us that populism was also the expression of a long-standing condition that faced Russian elites when they considered how to unite their divided society but kept running up against the intractability of the preexisting divisions. Aspects of populism in Russia could be found in everything from well-articulated economic arguments about the inevitable communalism of the Russian people, to the act of taking up residence in a peasant hut, to the simple decision to grow a long beard to signal one's preferences and affiliation. In the broadest sense, populism was the intelligentsia's attempt to envision a Russia that could transcend the divisions that defined it" (p. 11–12).

6. The author refers to: Rogger H. (1960) *National Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century Russia*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 172–173.

The first small circle in the very center is a dense and concentrated concept of populism as a whole, which had evolved by the middle of the 19th century and for which “the word *narodnichestvo* was first invented... the Russian people themselves could determine the path to the future, a path that would inevitably be collectivist and anarchist, and those on the right side of history, as good populists, must submit to the will of the people and accept the result, come what may” (p.10).

The second circle represents populism as a rapidly spreading populist agrarian socialism from the late 1860s to the early 1880s: “The populists at this level hoped to use the benefits of peasant culture and institutions to bring socialism to Russia, believing that the communalism Russian peasants practiced... could serve as a basis on which to transform Russia into a socialist/ anarchist federation through a popular uprising and sweeping social revolution... These first two rings of populism comprised that which the Marxists later labeled agrarian socialism” (ibid.).

The third analytical circle is comprised by those intellectuals who hoped for a peasant-centered revolutionary transformation of Russia, but did not advocate the fatal inevitability of the peasant socialist victory and institutionalization of the peasant-based communal socialism. The author includes in this circle “the founder of revolutionary populism, Alexander Herzen, who advocated what he called ‘Russian socialism’ but was intent on maintaining the blessings of Western civilization and full personal liberty, while hoping that a bloody confrontation could be avoided, ... members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party like Viktor Chernov, who continued into the twentieth century to regard the *narod* as the essential *raison d'être* of their revolutionary activism but still supported such ‘liberal’ institutions as electoral politics and representative government... These individuals and groups did not necessarily refer to themselves as populists [*narodniki*] (for some of them the word had yet to be invented), but it would be very difficult to see them as anything other than populist in orientation” (p. 10–11).

The fourth circle represents the widespread tendency among the Russian intelligentsia to use the peasantry as a way of understanding and interpreting Russia’s history and destiny. The author mentions many Russian writers as members of this circle, including such great ones as Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy: although they were skeptical about the revolutionary hopes of populist socialists for the peasantry, they still believed that the Russian peasantry was the key to the national destiny as a whole.

The last and largest circle of populist sentiments, the outermost circle, is defined as a widespread general opinion about the goodness of peasant life, the righteousness of the hinterland, the world of village values, the wisdom of ordinary rural people, that is, “the poor and downtrodden. It is highly visible because of its prominence on the world stage in the form of Russian novels, opera, painting, and poetry, and it can even, in a more remote sense, be found in rough-hewn wooden toys, or the present-day vogue among Russian city dwellers for living rustically in their country *dachas*. The cultural and artistic markers and memories that helped give Russia its sense of a national character based on the rural values of the *narod* also helped to fix and perpetuate the idea that the rescue and revitalization of Russia had to come from among the rural majority itself. This outermost

form of populism was not articulated as an ideology; it was experienced by educated Russians as a feeling of sympathy for, and admiration of, the *narod*, its environment, its history, and its 'unspoiled' Russian identity" (p. 11).

Thus, the author sought to present a panoramic overview of various directions of the Russian populist thought which aimed at overcoming the fatal backwardness of the country, and at finding a worthy place for Russia in the contemporary world. To provide such an overview, the author reconstructs the main stages in the historical development of Russian populism. The origins of proto-populism are defined as early as the end of the 18th and early 19th centuries in the people-loving sentimentalism of some enlightened representatives of the ruling Russian elite, as well as in the famous journey of Alexander Radishchev from Saint Petersburg to Moscow, who was compassionate to the peasantry and critical of the landlords. Ely considers some populist sentiments among the Decembrists, noting the radical populist spirit of the *Russian Truth* by Pavel Pestel:⁷ "He was among the most far-sighted of the Decembrists and was more concerned about the welfare of the peasantry... attacked the social problem directly... called for the abolition of the entire estate system... condemned serfdom as 'a shameful thing, against humanity, against the laws of nature, against the Christian faith', and demanded 'freedom of the peasant from slavery'. In many ways, Pestel's view of the *narod* resembled that of Radishchev. He interpreted the peasantry's central problem as lack of political equality and called for an end to the injustices perpetrated against them (p. 25–26).

The author describes the formation of a truly systematic populist doctrine among the Slavophiles, who affirmed the priority of communalism and conciliarism for the Russian people, and criticized the bureaucracy of the Petrine reforms as having determined the split in the life and culture of Russia's various social strata. The author pays special attention to the ideas of the remarkable thinker and writer Konstantin Aksakov as "the most devoted admirer of the *narod* among the Slavophiles. So devoted was he to his vision of the Russian peasantry, and so innovative in his interpretation of the peasantry's significance in Russian history and society, that in spite of the multitude of differences between him and the later populists, one can make the argument that Aksakov represents Russia's first populist thinker" (p. 33).

The author also mentions such an opponent of the Slavophiles as Pyotr Chaadaev, who became famous primarily for his pessimistic assessments of Russia's past and future in his first philosophical letters: "Chaadaev's denunciation of Russian society was brutal and unrelieved by even a drop of countervailing hopefulness" (p. 13) and; "Chaadaev's condemnation of Russian aimlessness and lack of potential was symptomatic of an urgently felt need to take stock of Russia's place in a rapidly evolving modern world" (p. 14). Nevertheless, as the author rightly points out, in his subsequent letters, Chaadaev identified some positive opportunities for Russia in rethinking and reworking its historical heritage into new and better forms of national life. The author would write that "Chaadaev had argued that since Russia was a 'blank page' it could adopt or reject the lessons

7. The author refers to: Pestel P.I. (1906) *Russkaia Provda*, Saint Petersburg: Kultura.

of European history and thereby improve upon them. Herzen went further, contending that socialism in Europe was impossible because Europeans were fettered by what they had to lose” (p. 27).

The author considers the evolution of the views of Alexander Herzen, one of the brightest representatives of Russian populism, in detail. As an immigrant, Herzen was an included observer of the tragedies of the 1848 European revolutions, which made him radically rethink the populist concepts of the Slavophiles, Chaadaev’s Westernism and the study of the German scholar August von Haxthausen, who published a book about the life and significance of peasant communities in Russia⁸. Ely writes that “Partly inspired by the Slavophiles, Haxthausen sang the praises of the commune as a bulwark against what he considered the pernicious influence of capitalism then sweeping across Europe. He argued that the commune had enabled Russia to retain the peaceful agricultural life of Europe’s past that capitalism was rapidly destroying everywhere else... He praised the Russian village commune as the institution which ensured... the survival of the very sort of traditional small farming of which Haxthausen heartily approved. Like the Slavophiles, Haxthausen admired the agricultural life as a moral realm in which salubrious, age-old traditions would be upheld” (p. 43). Herzen formulated the hypothesis that the backwardness of communal Russia was an advantage over the bourgeois West in creating new forms of social life: in Ely’s words, “Herzen assumed that Russia was destined for socialism because the vast majority of Russians were equal in their shared poverty” (p. 49).

The birth of the rebellious ideology of populism is described through the views of the great Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. However, Ely mentions that the first more-or-less systematic attempt to present a populist history was made by Afanasy Shchapov, while Pavel Iakushkin contributed to the populist hypothesis of classless identity with his methods of long-term ethnographic included observation. He would write that “Herzen’s ‘Russian Socialism’ designated the village commune as Russia’s vehicle toward a socialist future. The firebrand revolutionary Mikhail Bakunin declared the peasantry a revolutionary force capable of bringing about a cataclysmic change. The historian Afanasy Shchapov discovered a socially integrated society in Russia’s past and imagined it as the key to forging an egalitarian future. The wandering ethnographer Pavel Iakushkin attempted to erase the boundary between *narod* and *obshchestvo* in his own person, both by spending time among the peasants and by dressing and living in a way that erased the traces of his noble upbringing. The radical publicist Nikolai Chernyshevsky advocated for a socialist, egalitarian future in ways that inspired generations of revolutionaries... The word ‘populist’ [*narodnik*] would not come into use until the 1870s, but this cohort in the 1850s and 1860s set the tone for their populist followers in the 1870s and beyond” (p. 42).

8. Haxthausen A. von (1870) *Issledovaniya vnutrennih otnosheniy narodnoy zhizni i v osobennosti selskih uchrezhdeniy Rossii*, Moscow: Tip. A.N. Mamontova i K°. The author refers to Haxthausen A. von (1972) *Studies on the Interior of Russia*. Transl. by E.L.M. Schmidt, ed. by S.F. Starr, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

The author calls Nikolai Chernyshevsky a paradoxical populist, on the one hand due to his unconditional faith in the creative and revolutionary forces of the Russian people and intelligentsia, while on the other hand, due to his rejection of the specific nationalism of the Slavophiles and Herzen with their belief in the exceptional and globally significant positive qualities of the Russian community. Chernyshevsky was generally positive about Western progress but had strong socialist beliefs: Ely writes that “He understood the commune’s coelacanth-like persistence into modern Russia to be a potential ‘advantage of backwardness’ Russian socialists could make use of, referring to it as an ‘anti-toxin’ against the debilitating side of capitalism and wage labor in rural Russia... Chernyshevsky, more than anyone else, set a new tone among the left-leaning and radical intelligentsia. He pointed the way toward a life of self-sacrifice and single-minded devotion to the cause that virtually all young Russian radicals found compelling... Chernyshevsky can be considered the individual most responsible for the rise of populist activism” (p. 65). As the author rightly notes, the peak of Chernyshevsky’s popularity in Russia’s populism coincided with the manifestation of the controversial generational problem of ‘fathers and children,’ expressed in the populist calls for the intelligent youth’s active action among the people.

Ely then shows how, in populist theory and practice of the 1860s-1880s, various heroic, selfless, and inventive attempts were made to go to the people in order to awaken their creative and revolutionary will, and how, among radical populists, the idea of terror’s influence on the state apparatus of the Russian Empire and, ultimately, on the tsar, was becoming increasingly popular. However, the end of this populist orgy of humanistic terrorism — the assassination of Tsar Alexander II — turned out to be morally destructive and devastating for the populist movement. Moreover, in response to the assassination of the tsar, the police defeated the organizational structures of the *Narodnaya Volya* (People’s Will), and almost all its prominent representatives were executed, imprisoned, or condemned to penal servitude. Ely writes that “How did they convince themselves that assassination of the tsar would lead to revolution in the Russian countryside when they were already well aware of the peasant distrust toward educated elites and parallel faith in the good wishes of the tsar? ...One simple, though insufficient, explanation is that they had exhausted all other options — from propagandizing among the workers, to living in the village and attempting to ignite revolution there, to the deception of Chigirin, to urban public protest... Perhaps a spectacular act would finally shock the *narod* and/or *obshchestvo* out of its complacency... Other motives... were revenge against a state that had persecuted the populists for pursuing their revolutionary goals, ...outreach not to peasants but to the various sectors of urban society, including the liberal intelligentsia, the growing class of industrial workers, and members of the military” (p. 119–120).

The author concludes Chapter 5 with the statement that “The People’s Will would disintegrate, but in a sense the populists’ revolutionary ideology had already burned to ashes amid the flames of terrorism... Populism had reached a crisis point, but it would live on in the realms of art and ideas, and it would gain new life as a political movement in the early twentieth century” (p. 125). From the description of the end of the irrecon-

cilable bloody struggle between the People's Will and the tsar, the author proceeds to the analysis of the features of populism in Russian art and literature. He shows that Ivan Turgenev, Nikolay Nekrasov, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Leo Tolstoy made great contributions to the artistic description of the features and significance of the Russian national character (with the extended supporting quotes), but at the same time admits the deep internal ideological and artistic contradictions in the populism of famous Russian writers. These sections constitute the first part of Chapter 6, while its second part presents the reflections of populism in Russian art and music.

Ely argues that the Russian Itinerants created a complex picturesque panorama of the Russian national characters in their everyday life, in both sorrow and joy. Most of the works of this direction in painting are characterized by deep social and psychological realism protecting the human dignity of Russia's peasant and working people. The author pays special attention to Ilya Repin's works and his well-known painting *Barge Haulers on the Volga (Burlaki)*, writing that "What is arguably the single best-known Russian painting of the nineteenth century was admired from its first appearance for dignifying the narod and locating within the people fresh strength. Ilya Repin's *Boat Haulers on the Volga*⁹ managed to unite into a single image a condemnation of popular travail and an appeal for a better future... Boat haulers had long fascinated the intelligentsia as a species of human oxen, a forceful reminder of the dehumanization of the working class, and it was already a popular subject in literature" (p. 150–151). He continues by saying "More than just its initial impression of humans in harness, the wealth of contrasts and the food for thought Repin's painting offers help explain why it became an iconic image of the populist era" (p. 152).

The reflections of populism in music are considered in the examples of the works of the *Moguchaya Kuchka (Mighty Handful/Bunch/Five)*, and especially in Modest Mussorgsky's operas *Boris Godunov* and *Khovanshchina*, writing that "Among the five, the composer who had been most closely associated with populism was Mussorgsky" (p. 154), who succeeded in depicting the dark depths of the Russian national history and in showing that the Russian people possessed powerful forces that often manifested in an extremely destructive and ultimately hopeless form. According to Ely, "Mussorgsky's fascination with the Russian people fits more comfortably with conservative strains of populism. In his work the *narod* does not come across as ideal, and certainly not communal, but especially in his operas the popular masses play a central role. In both *Boris Godunov* and *Khovanshchina* the key to an understanding of Russia can be found less in the main characters and more in the people as a whole; in both operas the fate of the country is the fate of the whole people" (p. 155).

The author reflects on the incompleteness of his chapter on Russian populist art, admitting that "So much more could be (and has been) written about the art and literature of the populist age. This chapter has examined only a minuscule sampling of the lives, ideas, and work of some of the best known and most talented artists of the period"

9. There two translations, either 'barge' or 'boat' haulers.

(p. 157). He concludes Chapter 6 with a promise that Chapter 7 “will shine a light on some more of them. It does so, however, not to understand their work or admire their creations but to show how their creativity reflected the agony of the populists as they began to recognize the limitations of the high hopes they had placed upon the *narod*” (p. 158).

In Chapter 7, the author returns to the social-political and publicist issues of populism at the end of the 19th century. For instance, he considers the economic-social experiments and observations of the scientist and landowner Alexander Engelhardt on the life of the peasants around him in detail. The author pays particular attention to the reflections and initiatives of Engelhardt¹⁰ in the development of communal and *artel* labor, writing that “In the early 1860s, Engelgardt had written about his admiration for the village commune as a genuinely cooperative institution. He even made an appeal to young urbanites to go to the countryside to offer their services and to profit from living a simple country life... Engelgardt’s letters consist mainly of commentary on everyday life in the countryside, weaving his own experience as a gentry farmer together with that of the local community... Like other writers in the populist era, Engelgardt had to meet the twin demands for unadorned realism and portrayal of the *narod* in a positive light. He accomplished the balancing act by blending a tone reminiscent of a field biologist describing an ecosystem — that is refusing to intrude his own judgment on what he observed — together with the repeated theme that he was studying and learning from the remarkable know-how of the peasantry, a know-how hard won in the daily struggle to manage a grueling life devoted to subsistence agriculture” (p. 163).

A special section of Chapter 7 provides a systematic comparison of the works of two once-famous populist writers-publicists, the ‘pessimist’ Gleb Uspensky and the ‘optimist’, Nikolai Zlatovratsky, explaining that “Although their outlooks were quite different, their mission to understand the peasantry was virtually the same... They both sought to understand who the ‘real’ peasants were and to convey that understanding to their audience of urban readers” (p.167). If Uspensky mainly emphasized the hard lot of the peasantry crushed by hard work, poverty, and the rudeness of everyday existence, Zlatovratsky sought to prove the importance of the simple folks’ wisdom, and of moral relations in the communal life; here, “If Zlatovratsky was the optimistic idealist, always on the lookout for the praiseworthy sides of peasant life, Uspensky more easily gave way to despair and had to dig deeper and deeper to discover any positive message in the rapidly modernizing countryside” (p. 168). Thus, “it cannot be said that the work of Uspensky, Zlatovratsky, or Engelgardt was the sole cause of populist disillusionment, but collectively their work offered a powerful reflection of the growing sense of despair that populism’s optimistic hopes for Russia’s future may have been illusory” (p. 172).

In the last sections of this chapter, the author considers the evolution of populist political-economic ideology, and explains the growth of populist moderate reformist sentiments associated with the development of ‘legal, liberal populism’ and with the expansion of the theory and practice of ‘small deeds’. In general, on the eve of the 20th century,

10. There two acceptable spellings, either Engelhardt or Engelgardt.

there was a deepening ideological crisis and disappointment in populist doctrines. On the one hand, the development of capitalism in Russia was becoming increasingly obvious; on the other hand, there was growing stagnation and destruction of the age-old peasant-communal foundations; here, “The ‘crisis’ in Russian populism was brought on in large measure by a series of gradually accruing discoveries. The village commune did not, it turned out, offer an easy path to a socialist future; the peasantry was not after all a tinder keg of rebelliousness; and peasant culture was not in reality the preserve of long-suffering virtue” (p. 184). Therefore, Marxism was rapidly becoming a new attractive political doctrine which convincingly criticized populist ideologists for their sentimental utopianism of agrarian socialism since “Marx and Engels regarded the populist trust in the power of the human will as naive and utopian... The first important Russian Marxist, Georgy Plekhanov (a former populist), labeled the populists unscientific and Romantic, afraid to face the raw facts of global historical development that Marx had understood” (p. 81).

The author rightly argues that there were no impenetrable borders between Marxism and populism in Russia. Many *Narodniks* knew the works of Marx and, like neo-populist Viktor Chernov, tried to “redirect Marxist theory so that it could apply to Russian circumstances” (p. 188), i.e., sought to organically incorporate the fundamental ideas of Marxism into the populist ideology. Ely is correct in his comment about the interpenetration of populist and Marxist ideas in the theoretical works and practical activities of Vladimir Lenin, writing that “Marxism faced some major difficulties when applied to Russia... Even after the emancipation in most ways the Russian Empire still somewhat resembled a feudal system, with a landed gentry, an autocratic ruler, and a mass of subsistence farmers supporting them... The Bolsheviks under Lenin saw Russian circumstances as unique and stole a page from the populist underground, favoring close party unity, conspiratorial techniques, and enlisting the support of the peasantry. The Bolsheviks also expressed ambivalence about revolutionary stages and welcomed the early advent of a workers’ revolution” (p. 197–198). However, the author’s assessments of the connections between Russian Marxism and populism seem too brief and missing details and explanations.

In the book, the beginning of the 20th century is correctly called a period of the growing contemptuous-skeptical attitude of Russian intellectuals to the issues of ‘the people’. By referring to the bleak images of the peasantry in the works of Anton Chekhov and to the derogatory descriptions of the peasants by Ivan Bunin and Maxim Gorky, not to mention the cynical attitude towards the people among the Russian Decadents, Ely emphasizes the ideological breakdown and crisis of the traditional paradigm of the 19th-century Russian populism. He says that “So bleak is Chekhov’s story that it comes across as a sort of counter-exaggeration in opposition to the long-standing tendency to idealize the peasantry... Chekhov’s younger contemporaries, Maxim Gorky and Ivan Bunin, often showed a similar contempt for the peasantry... Part of this literary disdain for the rural poor was in keeping with the strictures of critical realism... But for some among the intelligentsia it would seem that disappointment in the peasantry had led not

just to renouncing the *narod*... but to laying some of the blame for Russia's troubles on their 'bad habits'" (p. 186).

In the last chapter, the author argues that "around the turn of the twentieth century a novel form of populism, often referred to as 'neo-populism', arose to play a central role in revolutionary Russia" (p. 188). The populist ideology got a second wind due to the neo-populism of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party (SR). Its ideology supported the idea of uniting the revolutionary efforts of all Russia's working strata and estates instead of relying only on the peasantry. Here, Ely writes that "Chernov discarded the utopian vagaries about the promise of the commune and peasant-centered revolution that had bedeviled populism in its heyday. He put in their place an honest recognition of the rise of capitalism in Russia, the revolutionary importance of the urban proletariat, and a more fully worked out set of guidelines for how to foment revolution throughout Russian society... Unlike the Marxists, who separated the proletariat from the peasantry, and focused their attention almost exclusively on the urban working class, the SRs envisioned both classes together engaged in a single struggle to overthrow the autocracy and establish a more egalitarian society" (p. 190–191).

It was the Socialist-Revolutionaries who played the most important role in the organization and development of the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, due to being the most massive and heroic revolutionary party at that time. However, as Ely convincingly explains, despite all signs of revolutionary leadership, the deep internal, often subjective contradictions, and the incoherent ideology and organization of the SR fatally predetermined their defeat in the struggle for power against the authoritatively united Bolsheviks. The author wrote that "As a result of their trust in democratic principles and belief that the people as a collective whole should determine the direction and pace of the revolution the SRs were defeated by a Bolshevik Party willing to take control in the name of 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' and to govern without consideration for any opinion outside their own party line... The reasons for the Socialist Revolutionary embrace of democratic politics and their inability to stand up to the Bolsheviks... had deep roots in their ideology, their sense of purpose as a party, and the special conditions in which the Russian Revolution took place" (p. 207).

Certainly, a history of Russian populism by Christopher Ely is a bright and original book which provides a compelling perspective of the topic in a clear and accessible style, offering a comprehensive account of the rise, proliferation, differentiation, and influence of the populist ideology in Russia. However, there are some shortcomings, the presence of which the author admitted in the Preface as the inevitable results of the ambition to present such a diverse phenomenon in the widest perspective. The more-or-less competent reader would question the author's choice of certain representatives of Russian populism. For instance, why are so many pages devoted to the populist-anarchist Bakunin, while another populist-anarchist Kropotkin is just briefly mentioned? Or why neo-populism is considered mainly on the example of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party and its leader Viktor Chernov, while at the beginning of the 20th century, there were many other no less remarkable neo-populist movements and personalities?

Perhaps, a more serious reproach of the book is that it provides the reader with too brief and fragmentary information on the historiography of Russian populism. Certainly, there are many historiographic references in the book, but they are rather unsystematic and mainly in English, while references to the works of Russian Soviet and post-Soviet authors are missing. There is a strong Russian historiography of populism presented by M. Ya. Gefter¹¹, V. G. Khoros¹², K. N. Morozov¹³, A. A. Teslya¹⁴, V. V. Zverev¹⁵, and many others¹⁶. Moreover, the Russian reader may be surprised by the book's bias in the philosophy, ethics, and aesthetics of populism at the expense of the more traditional Russian focus on the political economy and the sociology of populism. In this perspective, the book lacks the so familiar reviews of the *zemstvo* and university economic-statistical, empirical and theoretical works within the *narodnichestvo* framework for the Russian reader¹⁷. In addition, although the author mentions the main contradictions between populism and Marxism, they are described too briefly and fragmentarily. Therefore, if the author purposefully ignored the works of the Russian-speaking authors, he could have at least referred to the works of Teodor Shanin, which explain the mutual influence of the ideas of Marx and *Narodnaya Volya*¹⁸, and the essence of Leninist populist Marxism¹⁹.

Finally, the book ends too abruptly with the fact that the Bolsheviks and Lenin came to power: "While some populists — the *zemstvo* 'third element' or the legal populists — managed to rest satisfied with a gradual approach to bringing about the greater good, they were not typical. More typical among the populists was the struggle to bring to fruition a utopian future and to do so as quickly as possible. That fixity on the perfect over the merely good led... to a revolutionary mindset... And when the Russian Revolution finally did take place... the Bolsheviks' own urgency, utopianism, and ruthlessness lay more in Lenin's populist inheritance than in his knowledge of Marxist theory" (p. 218–219). However, this does not mean that Russian populism turned into a memory after the October Revolution. The populist ideology has reproduced in both radical and conservative forms in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, and has contributed to its analogues in

11. Gefter M. Ya. (2020) *Anthology of Populism*. Ed. by V. G. Vinogradsky, M. G. Pugacheva, M. Ya. Rozhansky, Saint Petersburg: Nestor-History.

12. Khoros V. G. (1980) *Ideological Movements of the Populist Type in Developing Countries*, Moscow: Nauka.

13. Morozov K. N. (2017) Socialist-revolutionary democratic alternative to the October 1917. *Petersburg Historical Journal*, no 4, pp. 144–157.

14. Teslya A. A. (2020) 'Slavophiles' in the populist perspective: Interpretation of Slavophilism of the 1840–1880s by M. K. Mikhailovsky. *Notebooks on Conservatism*, no 3, pp. 149–159.

15. Zverev V. V. (2021) To the anniversary of the half-forgotten book (V. P. Vorontsov's *Peasant Community*). *Russian Peasant Studies*, vol. 6, no 2, pp. 6–44.

16. *Paths of Russia. Narodnichestvo and Populism* (2020): Collection of articles by the participants of the XXVI International Symposium, vol. XXVI, Moscow: Publishing House 'Delo'.

17. Kuznetsov I. A. (2018) *Essays on the History of Agricultural Economy in Russia: 19th — Early 20th Century*, Moscow: Publishing House 'Delo'.

18. Shanin T. (Ed.) (1983) *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the "Peripheries of Capitalism"*, New York: Monthly Review Press.

19. Shanin T. (1990) *Defining Peasants: Essays Concerning Rural Societies, Exploratory Economies, and Learning from Them in the Contemporary World*, Oxford: Blackwell.

other regions of the world²⁰. Such a sustainable revival and actualization of the Russian populist ideas could have been mentioned and described in the book in more detail²¹.

Certainly, it is impossible to systematically explain all the features of such a multifaceted and contradictory worldview and world-action as Russian populism in a single small book, but Christopher Ely succeeded in presenting in his fascinating narrative its deepest ethical and aesthetic roots. He created a sympathetic version of Russian populism, which can be called a humanitarian populism, as opposed to the historical courses on the political-economic populism familiar to the Russian reader.

Гуманитарный популизм

Рецензия на книгу: Ely C. (2022). *Russian Populism: A History*. Bloomsbury Publishing. 254 p.

Александр М. Никулин

Кандидат экономических наук, директор Центра аграрных исследований Российской академии народного хозяйства и государственной службы при Президенте РФ, директор Чаяновского исследовательского центра МВШСЭН.
119571, Москва, просп. Вернадского, 82. E-mail: harmina@yandex.ru

Ирина В. Троцук

Доктор социологических наук, профессор кафедры социологии Российского университета дружбы народов; ведущий научный сотрудник Центра аграрных исследований Российской академии народного хозяйства и государственной службы при Президенте Российской Федерации.
119571 Москва, проспект Вернадского, 82. E-mail: irina.trotsuk@yandex.ru

20. Nikulin A. M. (2022) James Scott and Alexander Chayanov: From the peasantry through revolutions, to the states, and anarchies. *Russian Sociological Review*, vol. 21, no 3, pp. 202–228.

21. Nikulin A., Trotsuk I. (2022) Political and apolitical dimensions of Russian rural development: Populism “from above” and narodnik small deeds “from below”. *Politics and Policies of Rural Authenticity*. Ed. by P. Pospěch, E. M. Fuglestad, E. Figueiredo, Routledge, pp. 77–93.