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Receding landmarks

Looking back on the Vekhi debate

De verschijning van de bundel *Mijlpalen* (*Vekhi*) in het jaar 1909 leidde tot een felle polemiek over de weg naar vernieuwing die Rusland zou moeten inslaan. Christopher Read zet de verschillende denkbeelden van de intelligentsia over maatschappijhervorming tegen elkaar af.

Unlike people at the time we know that the failure of the 1905 revolution was only a temporary setback to be put right in the revolutionary year of 1917. Indeed, 1917 has dwarfed 1905 in the consciousness of later generations. Those who believe tsarism could have been 'liberalised', for example, can, to their own satisfaction, explain away 1917 as a result of war. They cannot, however, get around 1905 in the same way and by and large exclude it from their analysis. For contemporaries this was inconceivable. 1905 was not an aberration that could be swept under the carpet. All sectors of society learned from it. For those around the autocracy it was clear some re-structuring was needed, though the Duma was not ideal. The middle classes had been scared by the massive potential for social revolution which had occurred and were looking for better mechanisms to preserve their wealth and status than the creaking, anachronistic autocracy. Backwoods extremists among the gentry lamented the autocracy's feeble attempts to change and called for retrenchment and repression. Workers and peasants had experienced a brief smell of liberation soon replaced by the bitter taste of defeat. Liberal professionals abhorred the crude repression of 1906-7 – 'Executions! Executions! Executions!' in Tolstoy's words of 1909.

But nowhere was the impact greater than among radical intellectuals. For them, the apparent destiny of Russian history since 1861 had been the overthrow of the autocracy. Everything seemed to be moving towards this inevitable goal. Failure in 1905 seemed to imply that such expectations had been dashed perhaps forever. Some thinkers adapted their ideas. Lenin realized more than ever that the peasantry would have to be brought more firmly into the revolutionary equation and after the failure of the Moscow armed uprising of workers, which he had strongly supported, he began a

new discourse about the next stage being a revolutionary democratic dictatorship of workers and peasants. Trotsky developed his theory of permanent revolution which strove to remain optimistic by saying there were advantages in backwardness, notably that while the proletariat was weak, the bourgeoisie was, in relative terms, much weaker than its cousins in America and Britain. For the most part, however, the radical intelligentsia was enveloped in a tidal wave of despondency. Radical movements shrank in size. Narcissistic and hedonistic fashions - from mystical anarchism to Artsybashev's Sanin - took hold. Even redoubtable radicals like Gorky began, to Lenin's great annoyance, to toy with ideas of 'godbuilding' (*bogostroitel'stvo*). Without doubt, by 1909 the radical intelligentsia was in a state of deep crisis. It was into this potential inferno of recrimination and counter-incrimination, into the mother of all blame cultures, that a small collection of seven articles entitled *Vekhi* (*Landmarks*) naively and innocently stepped. It was the accelerant that set off the most violent of intellectual infernos.

While several of the *Vekhi* authors were, in the Russian term, publicists, that is they frequently contributed to newspapers and journals, several of them were not and most of them were not propagandists. There is no evidence that the authors set out to create or even expected the massive reaction to their essays which ensued. This is also borne out by the fact that within about a year of its first publication in early 1909 it went through five editions. The implication of this is that each modest-sized edition was expected to be the last but demand kept on rising beyond all expectations. In the end some 23,000 copies were sold. What were the authors saying that aroused such interest and, as we shall see, hostility?

The guiding light of the project was the brilliant liberal historian Mikhail Gershenzon. His aim was to make a small addition to the pile of literature building up on what had gone wrong in 1905 and what the intelligentsia should do next. To that end he contacted a group of friends and associates. They did not constitute a faction or intellectual circle as such, although some of them had contributed to earlier collections which had not had a fraction of the impact of *Vekhi* itself. Indeed, they never met together as a group and several of the authors do not appear to have known who else would be contributing to the final collection, still less did they know what their fellow authors would be saying.¹ They did, however, share a certain likemindedness. They were opposed to the Marxist influence on the left and were proponents, in

1 S.L. Frank, *Biografiya Struve* (New York 1956) 82.

the broad sense, of liberal freedoms plus usually, in a non-clerical sense, a religious dimension. The unifying point was best expressed in Gershenzon's introduction to the volume. His words are worth quoting at length:

'Their [the authors'] common platform is the recognition of the theoretical and practical primacy of the spiritual life over the external forms of community. They mean by this that the inner life of the personality is the sole creative force of human existence, and that this inner life, and not the self-sufficient principles of the political sphere, is the only solid basis on which a society can be built. From this point of view the contributors see the Russian intelligentsia's ideology, which rests entirely on the opposite principle - recognition of the unconditional primacy of social forms - as inherently erroneous in that it contradicts the nature of the human spirit, and in practice futile because it does not lead to the goal which the intelligentsia has set for itself - the liberation of the people.'²

Such were the two *leitmotifs* of the collection. On one hand, a defence of the spiritual and the individual, on the other a critique of what they saw as the intelligentsia's mechanistic view of human personality and society. Neither of these was new. Earlier collections like *Problemy idealizma* (*Problems of idealism*) as well as numerous of the authors' books and articles in journals such as *Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii* (*Problems of philosophy and psychology*) had already said as much. Beyond these basic principles the authors had significant differences of opinion, some of which came out in the various articles.

It was the second of the two themes that caused the deepest hostility among the intelligentsia. The authors of *Vekhi* blamed the intelligentsia's inadequacies for the defeat of the revolution. The most extreme statement, so extreme it was expunged from later editions, was made by Gershenzon himself. 'The intelligentsia', he said, 'should bless the bayonets and prisons of the regime which protected it from the wrath of the people.' Deeply implicit in this was a fundamental fear which came up time and time again among intellectuals, and still does, that the uneducated are not to be trusted. One might agree with Frank that 'culture and freedom are inseparable' but many intellectuals believed at the end of the day that the masses were a potential mob. In 1917 this was a major point of division between Gorky and Lenin. Time and again, in his writings especially in

2 N. Berdyaev ed. e.a., *Vekhi* (Moscow 1909; second edition Paris 1967), introduction.

Novaia zhizn', Gorky accused Lenin of gambling with Russia's future by whipping up the chaotic instincts of the masses. Sukhanov, the diarist of 1917 who was a Menshevik-Internationalist, said the real difference between the Bolsheviks and others on the left in October 1917 was that the masses lived and breathed with the Bolsheviks while the rest, himself included, did not have the same confidence in them. So, in a sense, Gershenzon was pointing out, in extreme form, what the intelligentsia already knew. This has been compared to pointing out to Cyrano de Bergerac that he had an unusual nose - he knew it very well but was outraged when it was made explicit. Similarly, though the language was provocative in the extreme, many intellectuals did not, for all their admiration of the masses, actually believe the *narod* (the people) should be anything but a passive object of the intelligentsia's high-minded transforming action. To change the comparison, the intelligentsia was Professor Higgins, the people Eliza Doolittle. Workerists like Lenin and Bogdanov or the peasant-oriented Tolstoyans were the most significant exceptions to this.

Most of the authors of *Vekhi* more or less shared the view that the intelligentsia's inadequacies stemmed from their values. For Bulgakov:

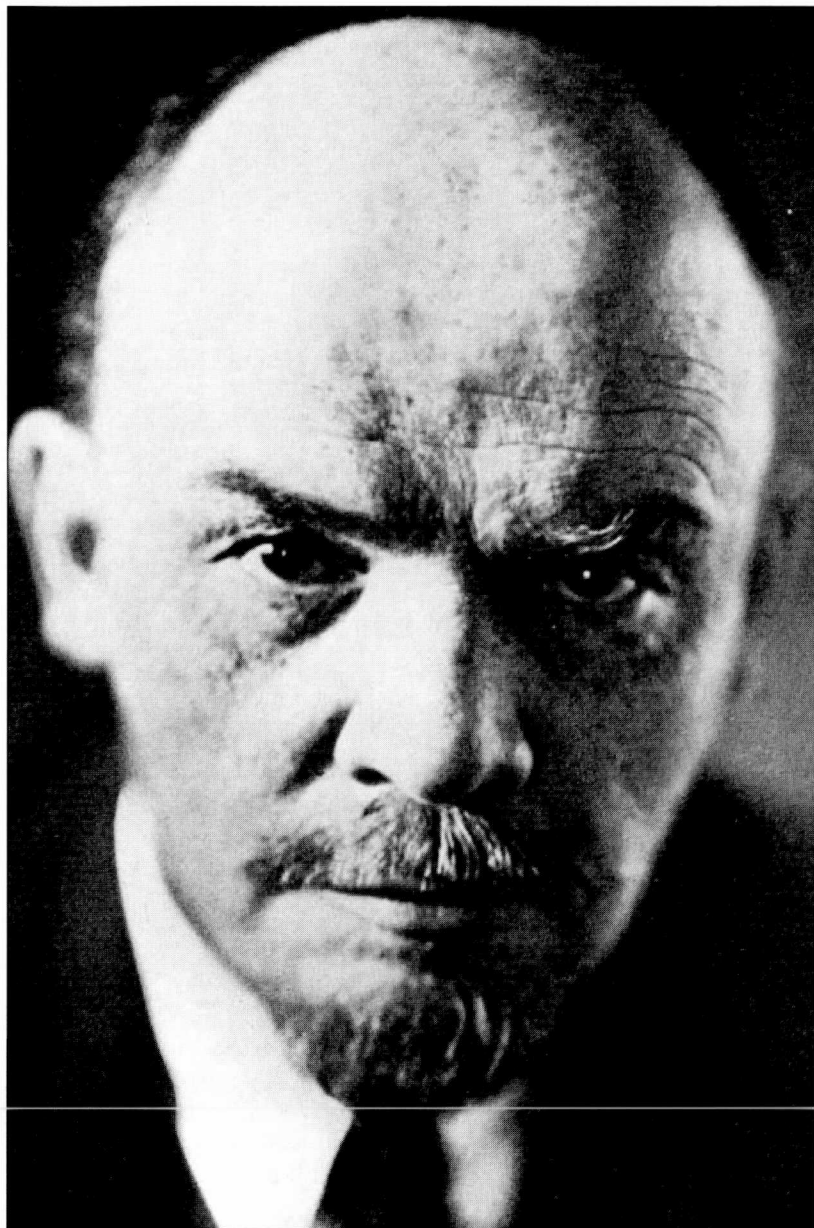
'It was our intelligentsia with its world view, habits, tastes and social mores that provided the revolution's spiritual leadership (...) In this sense the revolution is the intelligentsia's spiritual offspring and consequently, the history of the revolution is history's verdict on the intelligentsia.'³

For Peter Struve it was the utilitarianism of the left which was its undoing. In a curious and intriguing formulation he wrote that 'Bentham has overcome Saint-Simon and Marx'⁴ which appears to be saying the intelligentsia was insufficiently socialist and Marxist. Several authors said it was their obsession with the social over the personal which was their undoing. For Gershenzon the mistake was that the intelligentsia believed that 'thinking about one's own personality is egotistical and indecent, the only real man is the one who thinks about social concerns, is interested in society's problems works for the common good.'⁵ Elsewhere Bulgakov argued that the intelligentsia did not examine its personal morality, sometimes reducing the individual to the status of being a product of the environment and of the spontaneous forces of history. They ignored the individual as the living

3 N. Berdyaev ed. e.a., *Vekhi* (Moscow 1909; second edition Paris 1967) 25.

4 Berdyaev ed. e.a., *Vekhi*, 174.

5 Ibidem, 70-71.



Portret van V. I. Lenin. De leider van de bolsjevieken was een van de belangrijkste critici van de bundel *Mijlpalen*.

source of creative energy. As a result: 'The absence of a correct doctrine of the personality is the intelligentsia's greatest weakness.'⁶ Perhaps the most eloquent summary of their position on this came from Berdyaev:

'Our intelligentsia cherished *freedom* and professed a philosophy in which there is no place for freedom; it cherished the *individual* and professed a philosophy in which there is no place for the individual; it cherished the *idea of progress* and professed a philosophy in which there is no place for the idea of progress; it cherished the *brotherhood of man* and professed a philosophy in which there is no place for the brotherhood of man; it cherished *justice* and all noble things and professed a philosophy in which there is no place for justice and for anything howsoever noble. This has been an almost continuous aberration of consciousness, a product of our entire history. The best members of the intelligentsia were fanatically prepared for self-sacrifice, and just as fanatically professed materialism which denies all self-sacrifice. The atheistic philosophy which always captivated the revolutionary intelligentsia could not sanction anything holy, but the intelligentsia gave this very philosophy a sacred character and cherished its own materialism and atheism in a fanatical, almost Catholic manner. Creative philosophical thought must eliminate this aberration and lead consciousness out of its impasse.'⁷

What was that 'creative philosophical thought' which Berdyaev saw as the antidote to intelligentsia materialism? In particular, the contributors believed that only recognition of Christian principles, especially of the infinite worth of every individual, could provide a sound base for social action. This did not mean that they were not highly critical of the organised churches for all that Bulgakov himself had recently been ordained as a priest of the Orthodox church. The specific prescriptions of the authors varied but they shared a common core.

The most specific articles were written by S.L. Frank, A.S. Izgoev and Bogdan Kistiakovsky. The main thrust of Kistiakovsky's article, which is almost as resonant today as it was then, is that the intelligentsia, and Russia in general, lacked an awareness of the importance of law. According to Kistiakovsky, Russia lacked a legal consciousness. Centuries of arbitrary autocratic rule had marginalized law as anything other than the assertion of the will of the central power. As a result, citizenship, the habit of being

6 Berdyaev ed. e.a., *Vekhi*, 47.

7 Ibidem, 19-20.

law-abiding, had not developed. Law was simply understood to be a set of arrangements promoting the interest of the powerful not a complex set of common values, essential to community life, evolved over decades and centuries of practice and reflection. The vast majority of Russian society, the peasantry, had lived, to a large extent, outside the framework of statute law in a world of their own traditions and custom. They, and their defenders, mistrusted statute law as an alien and threatening force. 'Where', Kistiakovsky bewailed, 'is our *L'Ésprit des lois*, our *Le Contrat Social*?' In particular, Marxists shared this prevalent view of law as merely an instrument of the rulers not as a value in its own right. He quoted Plekhanov's statement '*Salus revolutiae* [sic] *suprema lex*.' (The good of the revolution is the highest law).

Izgoev was amused by the intelligentsia's obsession with misunderstood western philosophies. In an article of early 1909 he had written that, for Russian intellectuals, philosophy was like a clock that had fallen into the hands of an ancient tribe. They worshipped the clock without understanding its mechanism or purpose. In his *Vekhi* article he accused the Russian student body as a whole of being lazy and bad at its work and studies. He compared them to western students such as the products of the English Public School (i.e. private) education system which, Izgoev proposed following the likes of Thomas Arnold, taught healthy, hygienic habits as well as a conscientious attitude to work. By comparison the Russian student body was cynical, lazy, bored and miserable and affected by spiritual arrogance and intolerance - in Izgoev's view a deadly combination. S.L.Frank made comparable points about the intelligentsia's spiritual outlook. Radical intellectuals turned revolution into a fundamentalist, quasi-religious creed, based on dogmatism, fanaticism and intolerance.⁸

One of the most controversial articles, however, was that by Peter Struve entitled *The Intelligentsia and Revolution*. He also argued that the intelligentsia made a fanatical religion of its irreligion but he also argued that its determined atheism was a major obstacle to its efforts to realise its political and social goals. In particular, it drove a wedge between the intelligentsia and Russian society at large which, especially the peasantry was deeply religious. The result was the alienation of the intelligentsia from the society they claimed to serve. Echoing Kistiakovsky, but in a different strain, he argued that the intelligentsia saw no value in the state. 'Rather than see the need for the state to preserve order the intelligentsia', Struve stated, 'believed

8 A.S. Izgoev, *Russkaya mysl'* 2 (1909) 106.

the progress of society is not the fruit of the perfection of individual people, but a wager to be won in the game of history by appealing to the aroused masses.⁹ Instead, it should be engaging in constructive co-operation with the state, working within its institutions for democratic and social transformation. Even his own Kadet party had abandoned this path in favour of confrontation. In a sense, Struve's article was an expansion of Gershenzon's assertion that the bayonets and prisons of the regime preserved the intelligentsia from the wrath of the masses. It was Struve's advocacy of engagement with, rather than complete opposition to, the autocracy that opened up a massive reaction not only among Marxist and populist intellectuals but also among liberals. Even among some of the contributors to *Vekhi* the idea of collaborating with the autocracy was anathema.

Neither Gershenzon as editor nor any of the authors, still less the publisher, expected *Vekhi* to be more than a small voice in the 1909 wilderness. For one thing, as Gershenzon acknowledged, there was little that was new in what the seven authors were saying. Indeed, the opposite was the case. They were repeating truths asserted by many of Russia's great figures. In Gershenzon's own words; 'Our warnings are not new: all of our most profound thinkers from Chaadaev to Solov'ev and Tolstoy, tirelessly said the same things. They were not heeded, the intelligentsia passed them by. Perhaps now, awakened by a real shock, they will listen to weaker voices.'¹⁰

There was no need for Gershenzon to worry. The reaction to *Vekhi* was instant and massive. Responses came from all quarters of educated Russian society. Liberals, populists, Marxists and conservatives all called up their big guns to comment on - almost always to refute - the propositions of *Vekhi*. Even the emigration became involved. One of the most famous responses came from Lenin in the form of a lecture given in faraway Paris. This vehement reaction to *Vekhi* was certainly a surprise to its contributors and publisher who, as we have already seen, was constantly caught out by the ever-expanding demand for the book.

One major feature evoking the response was Struve's forthright article which gave *Vekhi* the appearance of being an apology for tsarism and this was what most aroused hostility to it. In addition to Struve's confrontational challenge Gershenzon had pointed to the other great reason for the massive response, the conjuncture, the point in time, at which the authors

9 Berdyaev ed. e.a., *Vekhi*, 170.

10 Ibidem, 'introduction'.

had launched what the rest of the intelligentsia saw as an attack. The critics believed *Vekhi* was opening fire on the intelligentsia when it was at its weakest. As we have mentioned, the despondency following the failure of 1905 was probably at its peak in 1909. The last thing the intelligentsia thought it needed, when it was being ruthlessly pressured from without, was an apparently treacherous uprising from within. Critics of *Vekhi* were incensed. It was also the case that its few supporters tended to acclaim it for the same reason - it called for an end to the intelligentsia's revolutionary tradition. This was the essence of the embarrassing support given by the right-wing, anti-semitic Archbishop Antony who saw in *Vekhi* a sign that the intelligentsia was reaching maturity.

An important feature of the debate was the light it threw on the liberal intelligentsia. In western terms, a good deal of what *Vekhi* proposed sounded liberal. What could be more liberal than insisting on the rule of law or the need for balanced, educated, creative people to work conscientiously at their professions to help Russia move forward? However, the main liberal response, a collection of articles entitled *Intelligentsiia v Rossii* (*The Intelligentsia in Russia*) showed how radical, how deeply attached to the intelligentsia tradition, the liberals were. One of the authors, Petrunkevich, spoke in defence of that tradition and of its great figures, Belinsky, Herzen, Chernyshevsky and Mikhailovsky, most of whom were socialists. This points up the danger of transposing language. 'Liberal' as used in Russia was a much more radical term than in, say, Britain at the same time. The reason is not difficult to see. The Russian situation put the accent on conflict with the autocracy and, from that beginning, there was a sense in which, despite differences, all the active opponents of tsarism had more in common with each other than with their shared enemy. Most liberals, even Struve, saw social democrats as natural allies rather than opponents.¹¹

The debate around *Vekhi* showed that this attitude was not shared by social democrats themselves. No group produced as much material refuting *Vekhi* as the Marxist left. It came in the form of several collections of articles and writings and also several volumes of literary and cultural criticism. While there were many nuances one theme ran through their response, the *embourgeoisement* of the intelligentsia. In his unsubtle, direct, polemical and reductionist fashion Lenin put the situation bluntly. *Vekhi* was 'an encyclopaedia of liberal renegacy. It embodied', he went on:

11 *Intelligentsiia v Rossii* (St. Petersburg 1910).

'the struggle against the (...) whole world outlook of Russian (...) democracy; repudiation and vilification of the revolutionary movement and open proclamation of [liberalism's] "flunkey" sentiments in relation to the Octobrist bourgeoisie. *Vekhi* is good because it discloses the whole spirit of the *real* policy of the Russian liberals and the Russian Kadets (...) The Kadet polemic with *Vekhi* and the Kadet renunciation of *Vekhi* are nothing but hypocrisy, sheer idle talk, for in reality the Kadets collectively, as a party, as a social force, have pursued and are pursuing the policy of *Vekhi* and *no other*.'¹²

Lenin's former friend and bitter rival, Martov, said something similar in more elegant language. In *Vekhi* and its predecessors, Martov argued, 'liberalism has been attempting to revise its past, to snap the threads traditionally joining it with revolutionary and socialist ideologies, and to construct a system of views appropriate for a *ruling* class, or more precisely a class which tomorrow must become the ruling one and must prove its maturity in the quality of such views. Liberalism is attempting to become on principle monarchist, nationalist and anti-democratic in its political conceptions, counter-revolutionary in its legal views, strictly individualistic in the sphere of economics and national-soil in its attitude to State and Church.'¹³

In 1905, the year the Constitutional Democratic (Kadet) Party was founded, Trotsky immediately concluded that the Kadet aspiration to unity with the left was an illusion: 'This party is less likely to draw off the bourgeoisie from the openly conservative Octobrist Party (also founded at that moment) than to bind the intelligentsia to the conservative bourgeoisie.'¹⁴ Even more extreme was the outlook of Jan Vaclav Machajski who, in 1900, had published a book called *Umstvennyi rabochii* (*The mental labourer*) that had a shock effect on the left. He argued that socialism itself, far from being an ideology which the intelligentsia picked up to liberate the people, was an ideology which emanated from the concealed class interests of the intelligentsia itself. 'Socialism', Machajski argued, 'gave a leading social role to them as the guides and directors of a future managed, controlled and supervised society.'¹⁵

12 V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works* vol. 19 168-175.

13 I. Martov, *Obshchestvennyye i umstvennyye techeniya v Rossii (1870-1905)* (Leningrad and Moscow 1925) 118-119.

14 L. Trotsky, *Gospodin Peter Struve v politike* (St. Petersburg 1906) 69-70.

15 J.V. Machajski, *Umstvennyi rabochii* 3 volumes (Geneva 1904-5).

In fact, Lenin and Martov and the left had a point which was picked up in various ways in the other intellectual camps. For the liberal Gredeksul' the current phase of intelligentsia development was one of heterogeneity. Unlike previous periods no one school dominated.¹⁶ This was echoed in a different way by the populist Ivanov-Razumnik who, writing in 1907, said that the new element was the emergence of idealism which would not necessarily conquer the intelligentsia but would have a catalytic effect, stirring it up and causing a creative re-think of basic principles. He was one of the few observers who was optimist about the current situation.¹⁷

Commentators were undoubtedly right to link *Vekhi* and the debate around it to social change. For fifteen years the pace of social and economic change in Russia had speeded up, though that in itself is not saying much. Industrialisation, expansion of the armed forces and their equipment, the development of railways, the increasing exploitation of minerals and oil and the commercial and legal practices associated with them had brought about a revolution in Russia's urban centres. While it was still relatively weak the professional and commercial middle-class had expanded considerably. The number of university students is a good index. In 1881 there had been about 15,000 students in universities and institutes of higher education in the Russian Empire. In 1903 there were 43,000, in January 1914 72,000 in the state sector and some 125,000 (including 30,000 women) around the same time if private higher education is included.¹⁸ This expansion had strained the limits of the old intelligentsia to a bursting point. Not only had the traditional state institutions given way under pressure in 1905, so had the traditional intelligentsia. The *Vekhi* debate was a focal point of the transition. New, more liberal, philosophically idealist and politically liberal elements were finding their place alongside the older more resolutely revolutionary, materialist and socialist intelligentsia. The dividing line ran through *Vekhi* itself. Its authors represented elements of both. Some of them, like Berdyaev and, to a lesser extent, Bulgakov, even retained elements of both within their own individual outlook, setting up contradictions they never resolved. Like other aspects of Russian society the intelligentsia in

16 *Intelligentsiia v Rossi. Sbornik statei* (St Petersburg 1910) 15.

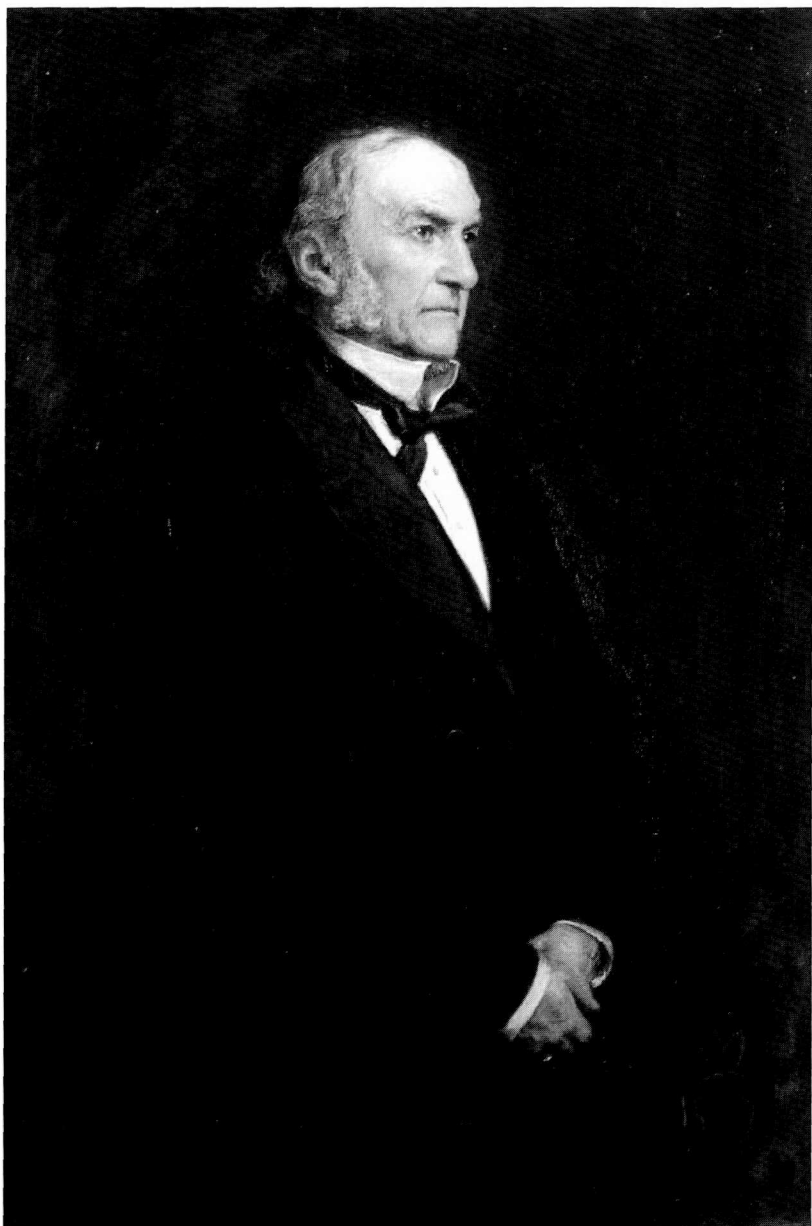
17 R.V. Ivanov-Razumnik *Istoriia Russkoi obshchestvennoi mysli* 2 volumes (St. Petersburg 1907) 468.

18 C. Read, *Culture and power in revolutionary Russia* (Basingstoke 1990) 7. The figures were originally compiled by Peter Kneen.

Read

1909 was poised at a turning point. The question was, which way would it, and which way would Russian society, actually turn?

Supplement



Het grote retorische talent William Gladstone. Uit: www.modjourn.brown.edu/image/millair/gladstone.79.jpg, bezocht 21 juni 2005.