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# Family correspondence in the Russian nobility: a letter of 1847 from Valerii Levashov to his cousin, Ivan D. Iakushkin

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*Introduction*

## The Levashov family

Valerii Levashov (1822-77), the author of the letter published here for the first time, was one of the four children (two sons and two daughters) of Nikolai Levashov, a retired lieutenant of the Guards who had fought in the war of 1812 against Napoleon and who subsequently acquired land in the Province of Nizhnii Novgorod. The family estate, situated by the River Vetluga some hundred miles from the city of Nizhnii Novgorod, the provincial capital, included the village of Bogorodskoe, where this letter was written. The recipient of the letter, Ivan Iakushkin (1793-1857), a cousin of Valerii's mother, had been active in the various secret societies formed in Russia after the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 – the Union of Salvation (Союз спасения), the Union of Welfare (Союз благоденствия) and the Northern Society (Северное общество) – in which officers who eventually took part in the Decembrist Revolt of 1825 had developed their social and political views. At the time when Valerii Levashov wrote this letter Iakushkin was still in Eastern Siberia, to which he had been sent as punishment for his role in the failed revolt.<sup>1</sup>

Valerii's father, Nikolai Levashov, and his mother Ekaterina, *née* Reshetova (died 1839), were a highly educated couple whose Moscow house at 20 Novaia Basmannaia Street was frequented by leading figures of the Russian literary world in the age of Nicholas I. Visitors to the salon included the poets Piotr Viazemsky (1792-1878) and Vasilii Zhukovsky (1783-1852), who had established their literary reputations in the age of Alexander I, and younger men who were reanimating intellectual life in Moscow in the 1830s, such as the saintly student of German philosophy Nikolai Stankevich (1813-40), the future anarchist Mikhail Bakunin (1814-76) and the future essayist, novelist, political thinker and memoirist known in English as Alexander Herzen (Russian Герцен; 1812-70).<sup>2</sup> Piotr Chaadaev (1794-1856), the author of eight 'philosophical letters' written in French, the first of which caused great excitement in intellectual circles and consternation among the authorities when it was

published in the journal *The Telescope* (*Телескоп*) in 1836, lived from 1833 until his death in a wing of the Levashovs' mansion, where literary figures flocked to visit him. The impoverished literary critic Vissarion Belinsky (1811-48), who exerted such a powerful influence over the development of literary taste in Russia in the 1830s and 1840s, also lived in the household while he was employed as tutor to the Levashovs' sons, a role he began to play in November 1837.<sup>3</sup> The family's literary connections were further strengthened by marriage: one of Nikolai's daughters, Emiliia, married Andrei Delvig (1813-87), a cousin of the poet Anton Delvig (1798-1831), and another, Lidiia, married into the Tolstoy family. The Levashovs were of liberal views, as these social connections might in general suggest, and were noted for their philanthropic concern for their serfs.<sup>4</sup> And yet perhaps they did not quite belong in the emergent intelligentsia, for all their literary interests and connections: they are 'good people, fine people', Belinsky told Bakunin, 'but their world is not our world'.<sup>5</sup>

### The conscience-stricken nobleman

The letter by Valerii Levashov that we publish here was written towards the end of Nicholas's oppressive reign, when a sense of frustration at being stifled by the autocratic state was welling up among the Russian cultural elite. Valerii presents himself in the letter as a conscience-stricken nobleman who is tormented by his inability to alleviate the plight of his peasants (« l'impossibilité d'alléger le sort des paysans me pèse », he remarks). In this he resembles his father, who had also written (in French too) of his desire to better his serfs' lot: « tout mon tems presque est employé à améliorer le sort de mes paysans ». <sup>6</sup> Valerii deplores contemporary Russian reality, 'this low world' (« ce bas monde ») where 'bad morals' (« le mal moral ») reign. He is disgusted by the corruption of officials, that is to say by 'all the acts of our chinovniks, their venality, rapacity, love of gold and lack of love for their neighbour' (« tous les actes de nos tchinovniks leur venalité, leur rapacité, leur amour de l'or et leur peu d'amour pour le prochain »). His representation of the social environment is of a piece with the depiction of the stagnant 'reality' (действительность) which Russian writers were beginning to indict in increasingly naturalistic tones. In fact, it brings to mind in particular the famous 'letter' that Belinsky addressed in the same month of the same year, July 1847, to the prose-writer and dramatist Nikolai Gogol (1809-52). In this letter Valerii's former tutor castigated Gogol for his notorious *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends*, a defence of the autocratic serf-owning order in which, according to Belinsky, 'huge corporations of various official thieves and robbers' fleeced the common people.<sup>7</sup>

In his letter to Iakushkin, Levashov contrasts the ignoble official world with the idyllic nest of gentry from which he himself had come and in which he had been sheltered from such evil. 'In Moscow, living with my family, this family which is so well known to you,' he muses, 'I never dreamt of all the evil that there was in man's nature' (« A Moscou vivant en famille, cette famille qui vous est bien connue, je n'ai jamais songé à tout ce qu'il y avait de mauvais dans la nature de l'homme »). Levashov had had no choice but to resign from

government service, as he explained the matter to Iakushkin, if he was to maintain his integrity. However, he appears to be an ethereal idealist rather than a vociferous and active social critic.<sup>8</sup> He professes to love the supreme being (« j'aime l'Être éternel »), whom he wishes not to offend by uttering any sort of falsehood, and he thinks he will be at peace only when he can 'adore truth and grow accustomed to loving it more and more' (« je pourrai adorer la vérité et m'habituer de plus en plus à l'aimer »).

### Levashov's use of French: a family habit or means of escape?

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As far as linguistic usage is concerned, Levashov's letter, of course, exemplifies the persistence of French as a vehicle for personal correspondence between Russian nobles as late as the middle of the nineteenth century. This continuing use of French for a private purpose might seem to confirm the negative view of *francophonie* as first and foremost an unnatural habit that separated the nobility from the lower social orders. (This view was widespread among nineteenth-century Russian writers and thinkers – the Slavophiles, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy all expressed it, for example – and it was perpetuated by twentieth-century scholars, notably Iurii Lotman.) Valerii's father Nikolai seems to illustrate this social and psychological separation of the Russian nobility from their peasants when in a letter of 1844 to Iakushkin (also written in French) he complains that his efforts to improve the well-being of his serfs are not appreciated by them as much as he would like.<sup>9</sup> Certainly Valerii's *francophonie* is a noble attribute that distinguishes him from men born into lower social strata such as Belinsky (the son of a naval doctor and the grandson of a provincial priest) who were beginning to make a mark in Russian cultural life. Such men (and Belinsky was a case in point) did not have the command of French that nobles who had been privately educated by francophone tutors could acquire, or at least they would have had no wish to use French with their compatriots even if they did acquire it, other than as a *lingua franca* in the company of foreigners.

Valerii's use of French in his letter to Iakushkin could be seen merely as the preservation of a habit that seemed quite natural in a Russian noble family in which there was evidently a strong attachment to that language. Emiliia and Lidiia also corresponded in French with Iakushkin,<sup>10</sup> who himself corresponded in French with members of his immediate family, as other texts in our corpus will in due course show. It is possible too that French was more readily used by Russian nobles in the mid-nineteenth century for conventional epistolary purposes than for conversational purposes, although in the absence of reliable records of oral linguistic practice in distant epochs we cannot be sure that this was the case. At the same time, it may be that in continuing to use French as the language of correspondence with Russian family members Valerii Levashov was out of tune by the late 1840s with members of his generation in the literary circles in which his family moved and that his epistolary practice was beginning to seem old-fashioned.

Whether or not the linguistic habits of the Levashovs, father and son, were beginning to diverge from those of the nascent intelligentsia, their use of French in the age of Nicholas I seems not to carry the socio-cultural associations that had explained the prevalence of that

language in the social world of the capitals, especially St Petersburg, in the ages of Catherine II and Alexander I. French is no longer prized, in this family, as a prestige language in the *haut monde* or as a means of advancement in state service, where success was closely allied to success in the social world. In fact, the Levashovs seem socially reclusive. Nikolai Levashov chose not to serve and not to visit those domains in which French flourished, such as balls and salons, because he saw no sense in such traditional social practices. Shunning the authorities and relying only on his own efforts to improve his estate and the life of his peasants, he led a solitary life and occupied himself instead with the reading of Russian and foreign writings (including French writings, no doubt) on agriculture.<sup>11</sup>

Why, then, does Valerii continue to write letters to fellow-Russians in French, unless merely to preserve a Russian noble epistolary habit that was firmly established in his own family? It is tempting to conjecture that French rather suited the other-worldly purpose that he seems to have in this letter to his cousin. Valerii is striving, after all, to escape from the evils of the contemporary Russian world in which he has served, as his father had before him. French for him is a vehicle for flight to a purer realm where he can engage in quasi-philosophical contemplation, speculating on whether 'man is an evil biped who seeks only to deceive and to enrich himself at the expense of others' (« l'homme est un mauvais animal bipède qui ne cherche qu'à tromper et à s'enrichir aux dépens d'autrui »). Its use enables him to reflect on a higher moral plane than the plane inhabited by *chinovniks* and serfs or than that on which the Orthodox Church operated. (The Church was compromised by its association with the state in the doctrine of Official Nationality and was accordingly detested by critics of the regime such as Belinsky, Chaadaev and Herzen.) By continuing to correspond in French, in short, Valerii Levashov may have been better able to imagine himself still at the family hearth, in a 'paradise where love of truth reigned and selfish love was destroyed by love of humanity, of one's neighbour' (« paradis où regnait l'amour de la vérité, où l'amour égoïste était annihilé par l'amour de l'humanité, du prochain »). The French language, in this instance, may offer some refuge from ugly modernity.

*Derek Offord and Vladislav Rjéoutski*  
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<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere in this corpus we publish extracts from a diary that Iakushkina's wife kept, in French, after Ivan had been sent to Siberia: Ego-writing in French: the diary of Anastasiia Iakushkina: text.

<sup>2</sup> Herzen remembered Ekaterina Levashova with affection as 'one of those marvellous phenomena of Russian life which reconcile one to it' (Alexander Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts: The Memoirs of Alexander Herzen*, trans. by Constance Garnett, revised by Humphrey Higgens, 4 vols (London: Chatto and Windus, 1968), vol. I, p. 353).

<sup>3</sup> V. G. Belinskii, *Полное собрание сочинений [Complete Works]*, 13 vols (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1953-59), vol. XI, p. 203.

<sup>4</sup> On the Levashov family see P. Ia. Chaadaev, *Полное собрание сочинений и избранные письма [Complete Works and Selected Letters]*, 2 vols (Moscow: Nauka, 1991), vol. II, pp. 588-89. There are also several internet sources of information on the Levashovs and their property in Nizhnii Novgorod Province: see especially <http://www.gttp.ru/text/040.htm>, [http://www.gttp.ru/PC/pc\\_24.htm](http://www.gttp.ru/PC/pc_24.htm) and [http://www.klubok-ok.ru/Nizheg.obl/Usadba\\_Levashova.html](http://www.klubok-ok.ru/Nizheg.obl/Usadba_Levashova.html) (all accessed on 30.10.2012). See also the article by S. K. Romaniuk,

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«По землям московских сел и слобод» [‘Around the estates of Moscow’s villages and quarters’] at [http://testan.rusgor.ru/moscow/book/sela/mosslob15\\_10.html](http://testan.rusgor.ru/moscow/book/sela/mosslob15_10.html) (also accessed on 30.10.2012).

<sup>5</sup> Belinskii, *Полное собрание сочинений*, vol. XI, p. 203.

<sup>6</sup> GARF, f. 279, op. 1, d. 68, fols 15-15 v.

<sup>7</sup> «Письмо к Гоголю» [‘Letter to Gogol’], in Belinskii, *Полное собрание сочинений*, vol. X, pp. 212-20. The quotation is from p. 213. The work by Gogol which gave such offence is his *Выбранные места из переписки с друзьями*: see N. V. Gogol’, *Полное собрание сочинений* [Complete Works], 14 vols (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1940-52), vol. VIII, pp. 215-418.

<sup>8</sup> In later life, in the 1860s, Valerii did attract the attention of the authorities for his radical views and moved to the estate of his wife Olga, *née* Zinovieva (a granddaughter of the Swiss military theorist Jomini (1779-1869)). In the 1860s Olga collaborated for a while with Bakunin, who by then was in emigration in Switzerland, and helped to establish the Russian Section of the First Workingmen’s International.

<sup>9</sup> « [J]e suis occupé très sérieusement », Levashov *père* remarks, « des apprêts pour l’inauguration de ma principale Eglise, qui doit se faire ce huit juillet par l’archeveque, si Dieu me permet d’exécuter ce voeu, mon principal désir sera satisfait » (‘I am very busy with preparations for the inauguration of my main church, which is to be carried out on 8 July by the Archbishop; if God permits me to fulfil my vow my main wish will be satisfied’). However, his peasants are disappointingly indifferent to these efforts: « ils y sont tous indifférents, vu qu’ils sont tous presque des sectaires » (‘they are all indifferent to it, seeing that almost all of them are sectarians’) (GARF, f. 279, op. 1, d. 68, fol. 23).

<sup>10</sup> GARF, f. 279, op. 1, dd. 71-72.

<sup>11</sup> Nikolai mentions « lecture des journaux agricoles, agronomiques, littérature Russe et Etrangère, dont je reçois une assés grande quantité » (‘reading of agricultural and agronomic journals and Russian and foreign literature, of which I receive quite a lot’) and notes that « tout cela me suffit et au delà dans ma solitude car je ne vois personne décidément » (‘all that is more than enough in my solitude, for I see absolutely nobody’) (GARF, f. 279, op. 1, d. 68, fol. 23 v.).