

## “Russian Nervousness”: Neurasthenia and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Russia

LAURA GOERING\*

“Nothing dies so hard as a word”, wrote Harry Quilter in 1892, “—particularly a word nobody understands.”<sup>1</sup> At the end of the nineteenth century, one such word—first uttered in America, but soon reverberating across the Western world—was “neurasthenia”. Popularized by the American neurologist George M Beard, this vaguely defined nervous disorder seemed to crop up everywhere, from medical journals to the popular press to *belles lettres*. Looking back at the years leading up to the Second World War, Paul Hartenberg recalled its remarkable pervasiveness: “It could be found everywhere, in the salons, at the theatre, in novels, at the Palace. It was used to explain the most disparate individual reactions: suicide and decadent art, fashion and adultery; it became the giant of neuropathology.”<sup>2</sup> Its sufferers included American intellectuals from Beard himself to Theodore Roosevelt, Edith Wharton, and Henry Adams;<sup>3</sup> for European commentators less convinced of the disease’s modern American pedigree, the list could be expanded to include everyone from Alcibiades to Tiberius to Napoleon. Anybody who was anybody, it seemed, was neurasthenic.<sup>4</sup>

The term’s staying power has been particularly evident in the dozens of recent articles examining neurasthenia as a medical, historical or anthropological phenomenon. Psychiatrists still debate the term’s usefulness as a diagnostic category (it is included in the most recent International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10), but has not appeared in the *American diagnostic and statistical manual* since 1968), while

\* Laura Goering, Professor of Russian, Carleton College, Northfield, MN 55057, USA.  
E-mail: lgoering@carleton.edu

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Quilter, *Preferences in art, life, and literature*, S Sonnenschein, 1892, p. 66. Quilter was referring to the term “Pre-Raphaelitism”. Also quoted by J Edward Chamberlin to refer to the term “degeneration” in J Edward Chamberlin

and Sander L Gilman (eds), *Degeneration: the dark side of progress*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1985, p. xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Certhoux, ‘De la neurasthénie aux névroses. Le traitement des névroses dans le passé’, *Ann. méd.-psychol.*, 1961, 119: 913–32, pp. 914–15.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Lutz, *American nervousness, 1903: an anecdotal history*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> See Michael Vincent Miller’s review of Lutz’s *American nervousness*: ‘Anybody who was anybody was neurasthenic’, *New York Times Book Review*, July 7, 1991: 1.

apparent similarities between neurasthenia and ailments such as chronic fatigue syndrome and myalgic encephalomyelitis have sparked discussions of the role of social factors in the construction of modern diagnoses.<sup>5</sup> But more than any lack of clear definition, it has been the protean nature of neurasthenia that has caught the attention of a diverse group of scholars interested in the cultural contexts of illness and disease.<sup>6</sup>

In his book *American nervousness, 1903*, Tom Lutz focuses on the ways in which the language of neurasthenia was appropriated and employed as part of a “highly moralized plot” specific to the economic and social realities of turn-of-the-century America. According to Lutz, “the appeal of neurasthenia as a disease was in part the way in which it allowed patients to reexplain the world to themselves, and the appeal of neurasthenic discourse for social theorists and commentators was also the ease with which it was recognized as an explanation.”<sup>7</sup> As we shall see, the explanatory appeal of the disease extended well beyond the borders of the United States. Neurasthenia made its way around the globe, assuming new guises as it interacted with each new set of cultural conditions.

Recent studies have analysed the “language” of neurasthenia in confrontation with everything from gender politics in America and Western Europe to traditional Chinese medicine in East Asia, but little mention has been made of neurasthenia in Russia—despite the fact that it is still a popular diagnosis there.<sup>8</sup> Yet examination

<sup>5</sup> B Bankier, M Aigner, M Bach, ‘Clinical validity of ICD-10 neurasthenia’, *Psychopathology*, 2001, 34 (3): 134–9; L Janu and I Prusa, ‘Neurasthenia—chronic fatigue syndrome: the basis and the meaning of medication and other therapy’, *Eur. Psychiatry*, 2000, 15: 444S; M Sack and P Henningsen, ‘Neurasthenie und Chronic Fatigue Syndrome—eine Übersicht der empirischen Literatur’, *Z. Psychosom. Med. Psychoanal.*, 1998, 44 (4): 319–37; Evelyn Kim, ‘A brief history of chronic fatigue syndrome’, *J. Am. med. Ass.*, 1994, 272: 1070–1; Simon Wessely, ‘Neurasthenia and chronic fatigue: theory and practice in Britain and America’, *Transcult. Psychiatr. Res.*, 1994, 31: 101–23; Susan E Abbey and Paul E Garfinkel, ‘Neurasthenia and chronic fatigue syndrome: the role of culture in the making of a diagnosis’, *Am. J. Psychiatry*, 1991, 148: 1638–46; Simon Wessely, ‘Old wine in new bottles: neurasthenia and “ME”’, *Psychol. Med.*, 1990, 20: 35–53.

<sup>6</sup> Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Roy Porter (eds), *Cultures of neurasthenia from Beard to the First World War*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2001; Taijin Kyofusho, ‘Ein japanisches Konzept zwischen Neurasthenie und sozialer Ängstlichkeit’, *Z. klin. Psychol., Psychiatr. Psychother.*, 2001, 49 (2): 166–84; Vladan Starčević, ‘Neurasthenia: cross-cultural and conceptual issues in relation to chronic fatigue syndrome’, *Gen. Hosp. Psychiatry*, 1999, 21 (4):

249–55; *Idem*, ‘Neurasthenia in European psychiatric literature’, *Transcult. Psychiatr. Res.*, 1994, 31: 125–36; *Idem*, ‘Neurasthenia: a paradigm of social psychopathology in a transitional society’, *Am. J. Psychother.*, 1991, 45: 544–53; Norman Sartorius, ‘Phenomenology and classification of neurasthenia’, in M Gastpar and P Kielholz (eds), *Problems of psychiatry in general practice*, Seattle, Hogrefe & Huber, 1993, pp. 21–7; Tsung-yi Lin, ‘Neurasthenia revisited: its place in modern psychiatry’, *Cult., Med. Psychiatry*, 1989, 13: 105–29; Dona L Davis and Richard G Whitten, ‘Medical and popular traditions of nerves’, *Soc. Sci. Med.*, 1988, 26: 1209–21; Arthur Kleinman, *Social origins of distress and disease: depression, neurasthenia, and pain in modern China*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1986.

<sup>7</sup> Lutz, op. cit., note 3 above, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128. A notable exception is Irina Sirotkina’s book, *Diagnosing literary genius*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002, which became available only after the completion of this article. See also V N Krasnov and D Y Veltishchev, ‘Nevrasteniia kak variant astenicheskogo sindroma: farmakoterapevticheskii analiz na modeli terapii tanakanom’, *Zhurnal Nevropatologii i Psikiatrii Imeni S S Korsakova*, 1999, 99 (7): 37–40. The article focuses on therapy without questioning the diagnosis of neurasthenia in the 25 subjects.

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of the Russian medical literature of the 1880s and 1890s reveals that, while neurasthenia was every bit as fashionable in Russia as in the West, it gradually assumed a form that was uniquely Russian. What follows is an attempt to trace the history of that transformation with a goal of better understanding the complex interplay of scientific, social and cultural forces in Russia at the turn of the century.

### Anatomy of a “New” Disease

The concept of nervous exhaustion was known already in the eighteenth century, but it was Beard who first claimed it as a discrete morbid entity, with specific symptoms and a supposedly physiological etiology. As Paul Möbius wrote in 1894, Beard would have been considerably less successful if he had written about “nervousness”, rather than “neurasthenia”: “The new name enchanted physicians and the lay public alike, so as to guarantee fast citizenship for the ‘new disease.’”<sup>9</sup> “Neurasthenia”, with its Greek etymology and scientific ring, appealed to modern ears in a way “vapours” or “spinal irritation” could not.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the breadth of the term gave people an easy way of talking about a whole array of maladies, much as nowadays the term “cancer” allows the lay public an avenue for conceptualizing a family of diseases with complex and varied etiology and symptomatology. Even more importantly, Beard conferred respectability on a group of symptoms previously associated with the feebleness of women or the indolence of the morally deficient.

As described by Beard in an 1869 article in the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, neurasthenia is a morbid state characterized by impoverishment of “nervous force” and giving rise to symptoms including dyspepsia, headaches, paralysis, insomnia, anaesthesia, neuralgia, rheumatic gout, spermatorrhoea and menstrual irregularities.<sup>11</sup> As for the exact pathology of the disease, Beard admits that he can only “reason from logical probability”, speculating that the nervous system somehow becomes “dephosphorized” or “loses somewhat of its solid constituents”, while undergoing undetectable chemical changes that affect the quantity and quality of nervous force. Eleven years later with the publication of *A practical treatise on nervous exhaustion (neurasthenia), its symptoms, nature, sequences, treatments*, Beard cites more than fifty new symptoms, including everything from heart palpitations to frequent blushing. Seemingly unconcerned by his lack of progress in identifying a physiological basis for the disease, Beard claims that the constancy of his “philosophy of neurasthenia” proves that it has “passed the ordeal of a sufficient number of experts in its department to be admitted among the accepted facts of science”.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Francis Schiller, *A Möbius strip: fin-de-siècle neuropsychiatry and Paul Möbius*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982, p. 73; his translation.

<sup>10</sup> Other common terms for similar disorders included nervous prostration, nervous debility, nervous asthenia, spinal weakness. Kleinman, op. cit., note 6 above, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> George M Beard, ‘Neurasthenia, or nervous exhaustion’, *Boston med. surg. J.*, 1869, 3: 217–21, p. 217.

<sup>12</sup> George M Beard, *A practical treatise on nervous exhaustion (neurasthenia), its symptoms, nature, sequences, treatment*, 2nd revised ed., New York, W Wood, 1880, p. 109.

The history of neurasthenia in Europe began with the 1881 translation of Beard's treatise into German,<sup>13</sup> which unleashed a flurry of journal articles, monographs and textbooks that continued through the first decade of the next century. While there was little agreement on the exact causes, symptoms or treatments of the disease, few doubted that in Europe nervousness in general and neurasthenia in particular had reached epidemic proportions. Typical is Richard von Krafft-Ebing's claim in his book *Nervosität und neurasthenische Zustände* that "[t]here is hardly another pathological phenomenon that cuts so deeply into the life of the modern *Culturmensch* [*sic*] as neurasthenia . . . Neurasthenia is truly the most frequent and widespread neurosis in modern cultural centres."<sup>14</sup>

Not surprisingly, laboratory experiments designed to uncover physiological changes in the nerve cell were inconclusive. European research on neurasthenics reported such findings as loss of elasticity of blood vessels,<sup>15</sup> thickening of the cell wall, changes in the shape of nerve cells,<sup>16</sup> or nerve cells that never advanced beyond an embryonic state.<sup>17</sup> Another theory held that an overtaxed organism cannot keep up with metabolic requirements, leading to inadequate cell nutrition and waste excretion. The weakened cells cannot develop properly, while the resulting build-up of waste products effectively poisons the cells (so-called "autointoxication").<sup>18</sup> This theory was especially attractive because it seemed to explain the extreme diversity of neurasthenic symptoms: weakened or poisoned cells might affect the functioning of any organ in the body. Furthermore, "autointoxicants" could have a stimulatory effect, helping to account for the increased sensitivity and overexcitability characteristic of neurasthenics.<sup>19</sup>

Russian interest in neurasthenia emerged against a backdrop of more general interest in "nerves" and nervous disease. Russia boasted a strong tradition of neurological research dating back to I M Sechenov's pioneering work in neurophysiology in the 1860s, a tradition that continued both at Moscow University and at the Medical-Surgical Academy in St Petersburg.<sup>20</sup> As the century drew to a close, it was the latter institution that was especially renowned for its work in this area. When I P Merzhevskii assumed the chair in 1876, he elevated the teaching and

<sup>13</sup> George M Beard, *Die Nervenschwäche (Neurasthenia) Ihre Symptome, Natur, Folgezustände und Behandlung*, Leipzig, F W C Vogel, 1881.

<sup>14</sup> Richard von Krafft-Ebing, 'Nervosität und neurasthenische Zustände', in Hermann Nothnagel (ed.), *Specielle Pathologie und Therapie*, Vienna, Alfred Hölder, (1895) 1899, p. 50.

<sup>15</sup> Anjel, 'Experimentelles zur Pathologie und Therapie der cerebralen Neurasthenie', *Archiv für Psychiatrie und Nervenkrankheit*, 1885, 15: 618–32.

<sup>16</sup> F X Dercum, 'The treatment of neurasthenia, with special reference to the rest-

cure' (review), *Meditinskoe obozrenie*, 1894, 41: 289–91.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in P I Kovalevskii, 'K ucheniiu sushchnosti neurastenii', *Arkhiv psikiatrii, neurologii i sudebnoi psikhopatologii*, 1890, 16: 1–22, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6; I K Belitskii, *Nevrasteniia. Ee sushchnost', prichiny, simptomyy, vidy i lechenie*, St Petersburg, Elektro-Tipografiia N Ia Stoikovoi, 1906, p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> Kovalevskii, *op. cit.*, note 17 above, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Sechenov had taught at both institutions, in St Petersburg until 1889 and in Moscow from 1889 until his retirement in 1901.

study of nervous ailments from the purely theoretical to the practical.<sup>21</sup> Other universities followed suit, and by the end of the 1880s, active research in neuropathology was being carried on at teaching clinics in Kharkov, Kiev, Warsaw and Kazan, as well as in Moscow and St Petersburg. 1883 saw the founding of two new periodicals devoted largely to neuropathology: Merzheevskii's *Viestnik klinicheskoi i sudebnoi psikhiatrii i nevropatologii* (Messenger of Clinical and Forensic Psychiatry and Neuropathology) and *Arkhiv psikhiatrii, neurologii i sudebnoi psikhopatologii* (Archive of Psychiatry, Neurology and Forensic Psychopathology), edited by the head of the Department of Psychiatry in Kharkov, Pavel I Kovalevskii. By 1883 a review of the literature on the subject from the previous year declared that “decidedly more works are coming out on ... neural pathology than on any other specialty”.<sup>22</sup>

Russian researchers were thus well-equipped to join their European colleagues in attempting to clarify the etiology of neurasthenia beyond Beard's vague notion of “nervous force”. In the end, however, empirically inclined neuropathologists found themselves beset with a marked lack of physiological data on which to base their hypotheses, leading many to focus instead on classification, symptomatology and treatment. Beard's lengthy list of symptoms was reshuffled to create a host of new sub-diseases.<sup>23</sup> As a diagnostic concept, neurasthenia was rapidly turning into a “swatter ... to hit many flies”,<sup>24</sup> or, as it was less charitably termed much later, “a garbage can of medicine”.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, the trend toward atomization was counterbalanced by a trend toward generalization, an attempt to determine what, if anything, unified the many diverse conditions labelled as one or another form of neurasthenia. The answer, curiously enough, was that neurasthenia was what was left over when all readily identifiable mental and nervous diseases had been eliminated. Otto Binswanger wrote of the need to construct the concept of neurasthenia “*per exclusionem*”,<sup>26</sup> while Möbius called neurasthenia “the purest form of nervousness”, i.e., nervousness “with no indications of other neuroses mixed in”.<sup>27</sup> Even Beard had alluded to the necessity of diagnosing neurasthenia by the process of elimination: neurasthenia is to be suspected when a patient complains of its symptoms “and at the same time gives *no evidence of anaemia [sic] or of any organic disease*”.<sup>28</sup> At the

<sup>21</sup> The founder of the department I M Balinskii was later championed by his St Petersburg colleagues as the “Father of Russian Psychiatry”, but his interests were confined mainly to the study of mental illness. Julie Vail Brown, ‘Heroes and non-heroes: recurring themes in the historiography of Russian-Soviet psychiatry’, in Mark Micale and Roy Porter (eds), *Discovering the history of psychiatry*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 298.

<sup>22</sup> *Meditsinskoe obozrenie*, 1883, 19: 1, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Between 1881 and 1901, the Russian journal *Meditsinskoe obozrenie* included reviews of Western European articles dealing, among others,

with *neurasthenia gastrica*, *neurasthenia sexualis*, *neurasthenia traumatica*, urinary neurasthenia, syphilitic neurasthenia, emotional neurasthenia and malarial neurasthenia.

<sup>24</sup> Schiller, *op. cit.*, note 9 above, p. 73.

<sup>25</sup> A Brill, ‘Diagnostic errors in neurasthenia’, *Medical Review of Reviews*, 1930, 36: 122–9, p. 123.

<sup>26</sup> Otto Binswanger, *Die Pathologie und Therapie der Neurasthenie. Vorlesungen für Studierende und Ärzte*, Jena, Gustav Fischer, 1896, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Julius Möbius, *Nervosität*, Leipzig, J J Weber, 1882, p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> Beard, *op. cit.*, note 11 above, p. 218.

Third Congress of Russian Physicians in St Petersburg in 1889, P Ia Rozenbakh, a docent at Merzheevskii's clinic, gave a talk entitled 'On neurasthenia', in which he pointed to the propensity of Russian clinicians to mistakenly diagnose as neurasthenia both organic disorders of the central nervous system, and various disorders of internal organs that are accompanied by nervous symptoms. Again, "neurasthenia" was reserved for the leftovers—complexes of symptoms "to which it is impossible to apply any designation other than 'functional neurosis', or, in today's terminology, 'neurasthenia'".<sup>29</sup>

By the end of the 1880s, interest in the disease as an object of serious neurological research had begun to wane. In his 1889 book on the study of nervous ailments in Russia, Fulgence Raymond reported in great detail on the research coming out of the major Russian universities, the high quality of which he hoped to bring to the attention of his French colleagues, but he was utterly dismissive of the "large number" of works on neuroses (a term that commonly referred to both neurasthenia and hysteria).<sup>30</sup> Advances in neuroscience such as Wilhelm Waldeyer's 1891 description of the neuron led Merzheevskii and his colleagues to pursue avenues of research better suited to empirical investigation than the search for the etiology of neurasthenia. Drawing on the European model, Russians came to accept the definition of neurasthenia as a weakness of the nervous system that served as fertile ground for the development of more serious disorders. N I Mukhin went so far as to declare that there is no difference between neurasthenia and "nervous predisposition", since "the predisposition is itself already a disease".<sup>31</sup>

### The Hazards of Civilization

Interest in neurasthenia had never been purely scientific, but the elasticity of a definition that had been stripped of all organic specificity allowed the language of neurasthenia to migrate beyond the bounds of the medical field. Beard himself had been considerably more interested in the sociological implications of the disease than he was in the workings of the nerve cell. And while the emerging pictures of neurasthenia in Europe and Russia diverged sharply from their American forebears, Beard's prototype continued to provide a common point of departure because it tapped into two of the central preoccupations of the era: "civilization" and national identity.

Although we can find clear precedents for the correlation of nervous disease and civilization going back to the eighteenth century, Beard showed no interest in

<sup>29</sup> P Ia Rozenbakh, 'O nevrastenii', *Vestnik klinicheskoi i sudebnoi psikiatrii i nevropatologii*, 1888–89, 6: 111–19, pp. 113–14.

<sup>30</sup> Fulgence Raymond, *L'étude des maladies du système nerveux en Russie*, Paris, O Doin, 1889, p. 64.

<sup>31</sup> N I Mukhin, 'Ocherki prichin nervnykh boleznei', *Arkhiv psikiatrii, neurologii i sudebnoi psikhopatologii*, 1893, 21: 1–48; 68–99, p. 2.

acknowledging his debt to writers such as George Cheyne or Thomas Trotter.<sup>32</sup> Instead, he proclaimed his new disease to be absolutely modern and very American. He even went so far as to claim that nervous disorders in general were “diseases of civilization, and of modern civilization, and mainly of the nineteenth century, and of the United States”.<sup>33</sup> “American nervousness”, as he entitled his second book on neurasthenia, was “the product of American civilization”, affecting mainly the “brain workers” of only the most advanced races: “no age, no country, and no form of civilization, not Greece, nor Rome, nor Spain, nor the Netherlands, in the days of their glory, possessed such maladies”.<sup>34</sup> The disease was not merely a product of civilization—the Greeks were certainly civilized, but they were not nervous, and in the Greek language there is no word for that term—but rather was linked with specific attributes of the modern world: steam power, the periodical press, the telegraph, the sciences, and the “mental activity of women”: “When civilization, plus these five factors, invades any nation, it must carry nervousness and nervous disease along with it.”<sup>35</sup>

In the preface to his treatise, Beard does acknowledge the possibility that neurasthenia might exist outside the US,<sup>36</sup> but still claims that in Europe functional nervous disorders are “so rare that even specialists in diseases of the nervous system do not see them constantly, and when they see them, do not, with very few exceptions, recognize or treat them”.<sup>37</sup> Those Europeans who accepted the designation “disease of civilization” naturally disputed Beard’s claim that the disease was unique to America, taking him to task for failing to recognize that Europe, too, was rife with the conditions that engendered the disease. For a European to plant his flag in neurasthenic territory meant to make a claim of parity with the United States in the fruits of civilization and industrial development.

Scores of articles in the medical and popular press sought to explain just what it was about late-nineteenth-century society that caused nervous ailments in large segments of the population. One German writer warned of the hazards to the nervous system of automobile racing;<sup>38</sup> another analysed the detrimental effects of accident insurance.<sup>39</sup> Railway spine, later renamed railway brain, developed an extensive literature all its own and was eventually separated from neurasthenia.<sup>40</sup> Russians

<sup>32</sup> Peter Melville Logan, *Nerves and narratives: a cultural history of hysteria in nineteenth-century British prose*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997, p. 18.

<sup>33</sup> Beard, op. cit., note 12 above, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> *Idem*, *American nervousness: its causes and consequences*, New York, n.p., 1881, pp. vii–viii.

<sup>35</sup> Beard, op. cit., note 12 above, p. 96.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>38</sup> Prof. Dr von Notthoff, ‘Automobil und Sexualvermögen’, *Zeitschrift für Urologie*, 1911, 4: 281–7, reviewed in *Meditinskoe obozrenie*, 1911, 76: 167.

<sup>39</sup> Paul Schuster, *Das Nervensystem und die Schädlichkeiten des täglichen Lebens*, 2nd ed., Leipzig, Quelle & Meyer, 1918, pp. 95–6.

<sup>40</sup> See R Harrington, ‘The “railway spine” diagnosis and Victorian responses to PTSD’, *J. Psychosom. Res.*, 1996, 40: 11–14; E M Caplan, ‘Trains, brains, and sprains: railway spine and the origins of psychoneuroses’, *Bull. Hist. Med.*, 1995, 69: 387–419; T Keller, ‘Railway spine revisited: traumatic neurosis or neurotrauma?’, *J. Hist. med. Allied Sci.*, 1995, 50: 507–24.

added their own causes to the list, from squandering of sperm<sup>41</sup> to the wearing of corsets and bustles.<sup>42</sup> In short, virtually any kind of shock to the system—mechanical or chemical, chronic or acute, physical or mental—might bring on neurasthenia.<sup>43</sup>

In a world where shocks to the system seemed to be increasingly frequent, neurasthenia provided a convenient framework for describing the social ills that seemed to go hand in glove with modern “civilization”. The picture of neurasthenia presented to the European public was, as George Frederick Drinka puts it, “much less self-congratulatory, much more anxiety-laden than the American version”.<sup>44</sup> According to Krafft-Ebing, changes in the political, social, mercantile, industrial and agrarian relationships of “*Culturnationen*” [sic], including migration from country to city, an increase in competition among both individuals and nations, and increased mechanization in the workplace, could negatively affect the life and health of “*Culturmenschen*” [sic]. Growing urban populations mean that food becomes more expensive, with urban workers often substituting alcohol for a proper diet. The growing gap between rich and poor leads to widespread dissatisfaction of the masses and the rise of socialist and anarchist movements. Moreover, a political climate that gives free rein to individual ambition leads to the “unfettering of passions” and “pulls man out of the domestic sphere, disturbs and destroys the peace of family life and contributes to the immoderate consumption of spirits”.<sup>45</sup> Children are neglected as their parents are possessed by the “demon of riches”. Because they now find it harder to accumulate the means to support a wife, men resort more often to premarital sex; their future wives are left with debauched and syphilitic husbands who father nervous, sickly children. Meanwhile, later marriage means that women must compete with men for a livelihood, for which they are biologically unsuited.<sup>46</sup>

Implicit in the writings of Krafft-Ebing and many other commentators was a preoccupation with the heritability of neurasthenia and the progressive degeneration of subsequent generations. Beard had acknowledged the possibility that neurasthenia might be passed from one generation to the next, with the congenital form being more resistant to treatment.<sup>47</sup> While he went on to describe neurasthenia as “the door which opens into quite a large number of diseases of the nervous system”, including insanity (melancholia), hysteria and hystero-epilepsy, general neuralgia and inebriety,<sup>48</sup> neither heredity nor these more serious complications were central

<sup>41</sup> P I Uspenskii, *Vvedenie k patologii nevrozov*, St Petersburg, K L Rikker, 1892, p. 46.

<sup>42</sup> P I Kovalevskii, *Lechenie dushevnykh i nervnykh boleznei*, 2nd ed., Kharkov, Izd. Arkhiv psikhiiatrii, neurologii i sudebnoi psikhopatologii, 1889, p. 138.

<sup>43</sup> In his 1887 textbook, Leopold Löwenfeld divided the causes of neurasthenia into five groups: (1) mental overexertion, including intense emotions, passions or fear, overburdening with school work and agitation connected with political, social, domestic or religious life; (2) physical overexertion in work and play, including sexual excess and aberration; (3) damage to the

nervous system from other illnesses; (4) intoxication or insufficient nutrition; (5) physical trauma, such as railway accidents or lightning strikes. *Die moderne Behandlung der Nervenschwäche (Neurasthenie) der Hysterie und verwandter Leiden*, Wiesbaden, J F Bergmann, 1895, p. 11; translated into Russian by 1894.

<sup>44</sup> G F Drinka, *The birth of neurosis*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1984, pp. 213–14.

<sup>45</sup> Krafft-Ebing, op. cit., note 14 above, p. 15.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

<sup>47</sup> Beard, op. cit., note 12 above, pp. 62–3.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 121–3.

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to the American picture of the disease. Yet it was precisely this dark aspect of neurasthenia that came to figure prominently in virtually all European and Russian accounts. When applied across generations, Beard’s notion of “impoverishment of nerve force” provided a medical explanation for a constellation of theories of “degeneration” that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>49</sup> Whereas the American neurasthenic was only a short step away from complete cure, the European neurasthenic was a few generations away from the extinction of the race.

In *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l’espèce humaine* (1857), Benedict Morel had attributed degeneration to poisoning of the system by alcohol, tobacco and drugs,<sup>50</sup> but for his successors the term became the catchword for a much larger discussion of social and biological decline, of which “nervousness” was seen alternately as cause or symptom. According to Krafft-Ebing, nervousness was “only the mildest expression of inferior organization of a central nervous system on its way to degeneration in the anthropological, biological and clinical sense”. Commentators often invoked the catch phrase “struggle for existence”, borrowed from Darwin but now imbued with a gloomy sense of futility, as though, as Drinka puts it, “[t]hey were not so sure that evolution was going in the right direction”.<sup>51</sup> Consequently, it was not just the health of individuals that was at stake, but rather the physical and spiritual health of entire nations. “It is no wonder”, wrote Krafft-Ebing, “that in this extraordinary epoch of human cultural progress, so rife with struggles and battles of the spirit, alongside the many victors there would appear the defeated and wounded in a contest that often proves to be a true struggle for the material and spiritual existence of individuals and peoples.”<sup>52</sup>

Russians could not help but be concerned by the same array of social and biological ills described by Krafft-Ebing and others, for by virtually any measure their country lagged far behind the West in the state of public health.<sup>53</sup> At a time when physicians’ primary goal was to control the spread of infectious diseases, particularly in urban environments,<sup>54</sup> psychiatrists recognized that the same conditions that led to frequent outbreaks of cholera and tuberculosis were detrimental to the mental health of the populace. As Julie Vail Brown has documented in her many works on the subject, Russian psychiatrists as a group at the end of the century were concerned above all with establishing and maintaining the professional autonomy that would enable them to treat the mentally ill and administer the asylums in which they were housed in the most effective ways. The First Congress of Russian Psychiatrists, which took place in Moscow in 1887, was organized largely in an effort to unite the profession in addressing practical problems associated with the housing and treatment of the

<sup>49</sup> See Chamberlin and Gilman, *op. cit.*, note 1 above.

<sup>50</sup> Benedict Morel, *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l’espèce humaine*, Paris, J-B Baillière, 1857.

<sup>51</sup> Drinka, *op. cit.*, note 44 above, p. 214.

<sup>52</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *op. cit.*, note 14 above, p. 15.

<sup>53</sup> Nancy Frieden, *Russian physicians in an era of reform and revolution*, Princeton University Press, 1981, pp. 78–80.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

insane.<sup>55</sup> By the early twentieth century, psychiatrists were virtually unanimous in their calls for asylum reform and many actively opposed the tsarist government they saw as bearing ultimate responsibility for the dismal state of public health in Russia.<sup>56</sup> Needless to say, treatment of nervous ailments—particularly a vaguely defined neurosis that seemed to strike mainly members of the middle and upper classes—was not a priority for reform-minded young psychiatrists.<sup>57</sup>

But while Sechenov and his disciples were busy in their laboratories and the majority of psychiatrists were lobbying for asylum reform, one prominent psychiatrist continued to write, edit and translate books and articles on neurasthenia well into the twentieth century. Pavel I Kovalevskii, noted above for founding *Arkhiv psikhiiatrii, neurologii i sudebnoi psikhopatologii*, organized the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Kharkov and served as its chair until 1892. A respected member of the profession and an avid supporter of asylum reform, Kovalevskii differed from his colleagues in several ways. First, he was a provincial psychiatrist in a field dominated by practitioners in Moscow and Petersburg. As the only provincial representative on the executive planning board charged with organizing the 1887 Congress, he had locked horns with the profession's élite over the location of the event, suggesting that a city like Kharkov would provide the best opportunity for understanding problems beyond the walls of the best Petersburg asylums.<sup>58</sup> Kovalevskii's clinical situation was also unusual. In the early years of his academic career, he had access to the provincial zemstvo psychiatric hospital as a teaching facility. When the zemstvo terminated the agreement in 1885, he was forced to move his teaching activities to a new private asylum that was designed in part to serve wealthy patients who would otherwise be treated in the capitals or abroad.<sup>59</sup> His clientele thus differed both from the zemstvo hospitals, which had been specifically charged with providing institutional space for the insane,<sup>60</sup> and the teaching clinics, where patients were kept only as long as their observation was deemed useful by the faculty.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Julie Vail Brown, 'Professionalization and radicalization: Russian psychiatrists respond to 1905', in Harley D Balzer (ed.), *Russia's missing middle class: the professions in Russian history*, Armonk, NY, M E Sharpe, 1996, pp. 143–67, on p. 145.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>57</sup> Because the science of neurology was already well-established in Russia, psychiatrists found it expedient to try to link nervous and mental disorders as a way of gaining legitimacy for the latter in the public eye. See Julie Vail Brown, 'The professionalization of Russian psychiatry: 1957–1911', PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1981, p. 169.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153. During the first three years of its operation, the new asylum housed 23 patients diagnosed with neurasthenia, including 14 noblemen, 5 merchants, and only 1 peasant. I Ia Platonov, 'Kratkii ocherk o deiatel'nosti chastnoi lechebnitsy dlia dushevnykh i nervnykh bol'nykh doktora I Ia Platonova v g. Khar'kove za vremia s 1-go oktiabria 1886 g. po 1-e oktiabria 1889 g.', *Arkhiv psikhiiatrii, neurologii i sudebnoi psikhopatologii*, 1890, 15: 78–100, p. 97.

<sup>60</sup> Julie Vail Brown, 'Social influences on psychiatric theory and practice', in Susan Gross Solomon and John F Hutchinson (eds), *Health and society in revolutionary Russia*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990, pp. 27–44, on p. 30.

<sup>61</sup> Raymond, *op. cit.*, note 30 above, p. 5.

## “Russian Nervousness”

Like Krafft-Ebing, Kovalevskii was a convinced hereditarian, whose extensive writings on forensic psychopathology helped to define and popularize the notion of “degeneration” in Russia in terms traceable to the biological determinism of Benedict Morel and Cesare Lombroso.<sup>62</sup> In the 1880s and 1890s, “Kovalevskii’s Archive” was the main repository for articles on neurasthenia that melded medical science with a conservative political and social worldview. For Kovalevskii, the definition of the disease was almost infinitely pliable: neurasthenia was “splendid soil” for the development of diseases of the nervous system and “a most propitious canvas on which the patterns and pictures of all kinds of illnesses might be inscribed”.<sup>63</sup> The lack of physiological basis left a blank spot in the definition of the disease—to borrow Kovalevskii’s metaphor, a canvas on which images of the surrounding culture might be painted. Taken together, works by Kovalevskii and his contributors create a picture of the disease that is distinct from both its American origin and its European permutations—a picture that is, I will argue, peculiarly Russian.

### Nerves and Nationality

By labelling neurasthenia a “disease of civilization”, Beard had facilitated its appropriation into the spheres of social theory and public policy both at home and abroad. But if the Western world was unified in the belief that “progress” was taking a toll on their nervous systems, it was the second pillar of Beard’s definition—nationality—that led to the differentiation of conceptions of neurasthenia along ethnic lines. Beard himself made no sweeping claims about the racial characteristics of Americans; rather he attributed the American inability to withstand the stresses of the modern world to climatic factors, including a temperate climate and overly dry air.<sup>64</sup> In Beard’s view, different races might adapt differently to climatic conditions in the short run—“the strong races, like the Hebrews and Anglo-Saxons, succeed in nearly all climates, and are dominant wherever they go”<sup>65</sup>—but in the long run, “race is a result of climate and environment”. Thus the many races gathered together in America are bound to become neurasthenic over time, but the infusion of “a supply of phlegmatic temperament” from immigrating Germans could be beneficial

<sup>62</sup> Elisa M Becker, ‘Nineteenth century medicine: sources at the New York Academy of Medicine’, *The Malloch Room newsletter*, 1998, 17, Online at [www.nyam.org/publications/online/malloch/malloch17.shtml](http://www.nyam.org/publications/online/malloch/malloch17.shtml); Nov. 2002.

<sup>63</sup> P I Kovalevskii, *Ioann groznyi i ego dusheвноe sostoianie (Psikhiatricheskie eskizy iz istorii)*, St Petersburg, Tip. M I Akinfieva i I V Leont’eva, 1901, p. 47.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Rudolf Arndt, *Neurasthenie (Nervenschwäche). Ihr Wesen, ihre Bedeutung und Behandlung vom anatomisch-*

*physiologischen Standpunkte. Für Ärzte und Studierende*, Vienna, Urban & Schwarzenberg, 1885, p. 155. Heim notes that doctors in Cairo without exception considered the Egyptian climate to be unhealthy for neurasthenics, choosing instead to send their patients to Europe for treatment! Gustav Heim, ‘Wirkung des Klimats Ägyptens auf Neurasthenie’, *Centralblatt für Nervenheilkunde und Psychiatrie*, 1907, 30: 732–5, reviewed in *Obozrenie psikiatrii, neurologii i eksperimental’noi psikhologii*, 1908, 13: 117.

<sup>65</sup> Beard, op. cit., note 34 above, p. 172.

in counteracting the nervous exhaustion of “native” Americans.<sup>66</sup> The Americanization of Europe, meanwhile, would have the opposite effect, making the easy-going Germans increasingly nervous.

Some Europeans followed Beard in placing the blame on climate, but, again, with their own pessimistic twist. For example, according to W B Neftel, European immigrants unable to tolerate new climatic conditions degenerate into an enfeebled race of Americans, whose predisposition toward nervous diseases of all kinds stems from inferior digestion, underdeveloped sexual functioning and low fertility. Moreover, Neftel completely discounts the detrimental effects of modern civilization propounded by Beard. On the contrary, it is scientific progress that helps combat disease, and the inherent weakness of American nervous systems is all the more conspicuous against the backdrop of high standards of diet and public health.<sup>67</sup>

But it was race and nationality, not climate, that weighed heavily on European consciousness in the last third of the nineteenth century—from French concern over losses in the Franco-Prussian War to national unity movements in Germany and Italy to the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. While no European commentator could accept Beard’s claim that neurasthenia was a uniquely American disease, virtually all entered into the discussion of the link between race or nationality and the predisposition to nervous disease. In addition to Americans, two groups are cited most often as being particularly susceptible to neurasthenia: Slavs and Jews. It will be recalled that Beard considered the Jews to be one of the “strong races”,<sup>68</sup> with Russians among those least likely to be neurasthenic,<sup>69</sup> presumably because they had not reached a sufficiently advanced state of “civilization” to be nervous. For Europeans who viewed neurasthenia not as a badge of civilization but as a sign of degeneration, however, the inferior Slavs and degenerate Jews were the prime candidates.<sup>70</sup> Basing his remarks on his own experiences with Russian émigrés in Munich, Hugo von Ziemssen writes that Russia more than any other nation suffers from an overabundance of “worn-out brains” and “young old folks”. Russians lack the “productivity and freshness of mind” that grow out of “physical health, a normal psychic life and the experience acquired through labour”; the “basic exhaustibility” of their malformed nervous systems can lead to “partial or complete impairment of mental capabilities”.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340.

<sup>67</sup> Neftel, ‘Über Atremie, nebst Bemerkungen über die Nervosität der Amerikaner’ (review), *Meditsinskoe obozrenie*, 1883, 22: 105–10.

<sup>68</sup> Beard, *op. cit.*, note 34 above, p. 172.

<sup>69</sup> *Idem*, *op. cit.*, note 12 above, p. 2.

<sup>70</sup> Franz Carl Müller (ed.), *Handbuch der Neurasthenie*, Leipzig, F S W Vogel, 1893, p. 65; L Bouvoret (Bouvet), ‘Neurasthenia’, *J. nerv. ment. Dis.*, 1891, 8: 496–503, p. 496; Löwenfeld, *op. cit.*, note 43 above, p. 11; Binswanger, *op. cit.*, note 26 above, p. 46.

<sup>71</sup> Hugo von Ziemssen, ‘Die Neurasthenie und ihre Behandlung’, *Meditsinskoe obozrenie*, 1888, 29: 147–8, p. 147. The Russian reviewer is sceptical about von Ziemssen’s conclusions: “What about Americans? There is no doubt that the greatest number of neurasthenics—and those suffering from the most serious forms—can be found in America, where the disease was first established.”

At the same time, European stereotypes played into Russia’s own preoccupation with national identity. Even before Peter the Great’s programme of forced westernization at the turn of the eighteenth century, the question of Russia’s stance vis-à-vis Western Europe had never been far from public consciousness. Was Russia a cultural and political backwater that would do well to look westward for its models, or was it something else entirely, a separate nation whose destiny ought to be shaped not by European principles, but by its own indigenous political, economic and moral values? By the 1840s, when the two sides had crystallized around the terms “Westernizer” and “Slavophile”, the so-called “thick journals” were filled with articles extending the debate into all aspects of social, political and cultural life. Slavophiles, who envisioned a revitalized civilization rooted in the tenets of Russian Orthodoxy as exemplified by the peasant commune, polemicized endlessly with Westernizers, who believed that Russia was two steps behind its Western European counterparts on the universal path of human civilization.

If one were to predict how the subject of neurasthenia might figure in the debate between Slavophiles and Westernizers, two possibilities spring to mind. A Westernizer might adopt the American view of the disease as a sign that Russia was on her way to the level of “civilization” already achieved in the West. While its technological and scientific achievements may have seemed meagre by Western standards, Russians could point to increased industrial output, an expanding network of railroads and rapid population increases in urban centres to explain their growing nervousness. Put another way, a Westernizer might cite a growing epidemic of neurasthenia as proof that Russia was duly following in the footsteps of her more advanced Western neighbours. A Slavophile, on the other hand, would find in European writings on neurasthenia and degeneration ample ammunition for arguing that Russia should turn her back on the West and seek her destiny elsewhere. A Russian clinician of Slavophile bent might have easily sought alternative explanations for certain neurological and psychological symptoms, dismissing neurasthenia as an ailment peculiar to the decaying West.

Yet, as we have already seen, Russian physicians did not dismiss the disease; they embraced it. Notwithstanding differences of opinion regarding causes, symptoms or treatment, Russian commentators writing in the 1880s and 1890s were united in their belief that Russians were just as nervous as anyone else—if not more so. Already in 1886, Kovalevskii had declared: “At present we Russians will hardly find rivals in other nations when it comes to the enormous number of neurasthenics in our homeland. Might one therefore not be justified in calling neurasthenia the Russian illness?”<sup>72</sup> At first glance, it would seem that the Russians simply adopted the European version of the disease. The most comprehensive Russian monograph on the subject is little more than an encyclopaedic compilation of European sources that lifts extensive sections verbatim from Krafft-Ebing, Maurice de Fleury and others, with almost no independent analysis. In a bibliography citing well over 500

<sup>72</sup> P I Kovalevskii, ‘Folie du doute’, *Arkhiv psikiatrii, neurologii i sudebnoi psikhopatologii*, 1886, 8: 36–57, p. 38.

sources, Russian works are barely mentioned.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, Russians had long been accustomed to relying on Western Europe for scientific advances. As Alexander Herzen wrote in 1842, “Europe goes through the strains of burdensome pregnancy, painful childbirth, and exhaustive nursing—and we take the child.”<sup>74</sup> Was Russia’s appropriation of the language of neurasthenia yet another case of cross-cultural adoption of a child long since past its formative years?

In fact, the situation is considerably more complex. Neurasthenia did indeed arrive in Russia after extensive interaction with the mythology of degeneration in Western Europe. But because of what Lutz has termed its “discursive heterogeneity and semiotic vagrancy”,<sup>75</sup> it retained an extraordinary degree of malleability; it both shaped Russian culture and was shaped by it.

### The Politics of Neurasthenia

In Europe the term “degeneration” had been appropriated by groups of all political persuasions,<sup>76</sup> but it entered into the discussion of neurasthenia in a form that represented a curious admixture of absolute faith in the forward progress of mankind and a conservative political stance. The “degenerationists” who concerned themselves explicitly with the nervous systems of the populace might best be described as conservative Hegelians who maintained that history marches forward according to its own ineffable laws and that human attempts to interfere with the natural order of things can only do harm. Their eventual standard-bearer was Max Nordau, whose 1892 book *Degeneration* was a compendium of pseudo-medical explanations for the supposedly degenerate state of European art. Nordau, who classified neurasthenia as one of the “mental stigmata” of degeneration, wrote that “all development is carried on slowly”<sup>77</sup> and “[a] doctrine opposed to all natural laws is justly resisted”.<sup>78</sup> “Humanity has need of a hierarchy”, at the head of which will stand not a Nietzschean “ego-maniac”, but rather a man “of richest brain, most disciplined will and concentrated attention”<sup>79</sup>—in other words, a man with a healthy nervous system.

The idea that modern society should rightfully be organized around a hierarchy based on physical and mental fitness struck a chord with the conservative political views of Kovalevskii and his colleagues. A A Iakovlev, in an 1891 lecture reprinted in Kovalevskii’s journal, traced the beginnings of nervousness in Europe to the French Revolution, when the hereditary aristocracy was replaced by “an aristocracy of brains, talent and knowledge” and individuals were forced to throw themselves

<sup>73</sup> Belitskii, op. cit., note 18 above.

<sup>74</sup> Aleksandr Herzen, ‘Diletantizm v nauke’, *Sochineniia*, Moscow, Khudozh. lit., 1955, vol. 2, p. 10. Quoted in Alexander Vucinich, *Science in Russian culture: a history to 1860*, 2 vols, Stanford University Press, 1963, vol. 1, p. 292; his translation.

<sup>75</sup> Lutz, op. cit., note 3 above, p. 23.

<sup>76</sup> Steven E Aschheim, ‘Max Nordau, Friedrich Nietzsche and *Degeneration*’, *J. contemp. Hist.*, 1993, 28: 643–57, p. 649.

<sup>77</sup> Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1993, p. 544.

All quotations from Nordau are from this anonymous translation.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 472.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

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into the “boiling maelstrom of activity” to compete for their livelihood. The “nerve-laden atmosphere” everyone must breathe is “the most favourable soil imaginable for the exhaustion and destruction of weak, unstable nervous systems”. The new order, gained at such a great cost, is “nothing more than an extra crack in the fortress of humanity, a breach in which there instantly appeared the bloody flag of nervousness”<sup>80</sup>

Kovalevskii himself linked the rise of neurasthenia with the rise of individualism, but he found its origins closer to home—namely in the Russian political situation of the preceding thirty or forty years. In the 1850s, he wrote, Russian society resembled a pond in which the few fresh springs or streams flowing in were undetectable beneath so much stagnant water. The reforms of Alexander II cleared out the sediment, allowing the springs to flow more freely, but at the same time turning society on its head and depriving a whole generation of youth of a proper upbringing.

Lacking God within them, they rushed to embrace mammon. Lack of conscience and moral restraint, often concealed behind fancy phrases, became the norm. The pursuit of profit required extreme exertion of energy and effort: countless sleepless nights, excessive mental exertion, lack of means, frequent bargaining with one’s conscience—all this could not help but devastate the nervous system of these young warriors, laying the foundation for an unstable nervous system and all types of neurasthenia.<sup>81</sup>

These exhausted and irritated nervous systems required artificial stimulation in the form of immoderate consumption of coffee, tea, tobacco or alcohol. The result was an entire unfit generation, which, in turn, begets a subsequent generation that is even more sickly. This defective genealogy explains the “dissatisfaction with life even among children, apathy, pointless suicides, hopelessness, complete psychical emptiness, extreme nervousness and the tendency toward mental illness” in the current population.<sup>82</sup> Throughout the 1880s and 1890s the link between neurasthenia and degeneration was a common leitmotif in the pages of the *Arkhir*. Andrei Popov compared it to a sphinx which “every day gives humanity insoluble riddles, and which chews up throngs of victims, bringing despair to those waiting in line”.<sup>83</sup> N I Mukhin bemoaned the paucity of “happy little corners” where “sturdy people with stable nervous systems” have managed to escape its clutches. The rest of the populace—some “feverishly working, enduring all manner of privation, suffering blows to the head from all directions and drowning their sorrows”, and others who “lack moral principles” and “are idle and drink from idleness and boredom”—is doomed: “By a strange, unjust twist of fate, both the reward for labour and the punishment for sin was one and the same: degeneration.”<sup>84</sup>

<sup>80</sup> A A Iakovlev, ‘O nashei sovremennoi nervnosti’, *Arkhir psikhiiatrii, neurologii i sudebnoi psikhopatologii*, 1891, 18 (2): 25–49, p. 28.

<sup>81</sup> P I Kovalevskii, *Nervnye bolezni nashego obshchestva*, Kharkov, Tipografiia Zil’berberga, 1894, p. 42.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43

<sup>83</sup> Andrei Popov, ‘Neirasteniia i patofobia’, *Arkhir psikhiiatrii, neurologii i sudebnoi psikhopatologii*, 1898, 32: 20–114, p. 21.

<sup>84</sup> N I Mukhin, ‘Neirasteniia i degeneratsiia’, *Arkhir psikhiiatrii, neurologii i sudebnoi psikhopatologii*, 1888, 12: 49–67, p. 49.

What is most striking about the Kovalevskian version of neurasthenia is that the technological stresses described by Beard have been replaced by the moral stresses of an upended social order as the main cause of damage to the nervous system. Kovalevskii seems to echo Nordau when he writes that modern man “must have a great deal of will power, a firm character, and an understanding of the right way to live” if he is to avoid being dashed against the many “skerries and submerged rocks” he will encounter in the sea of life.<sup>85</sup> But unlike Nordau, who rejects all but the most empirically based theology, Kovalevskii appeals not only to science, but to religion as well. His advice for parents who want to bring up children with healthy nervous systems: “Do not be ashamed to acknowledge the name of the Lord, honour your tsar without hypocrisy and without servility, do not be ashamed to confess that you are a Russian and you love your homeland.”<sup>86</sup>

In Kovalevskii’s prescription a Russian of the time would instantly recognize the slogan “orthodoxy, autocracy, nationality” that had been popular under Nicholas I and had regained some of its currency under the conservative Alexander III.<sup>87</sup> By equating the health of the individual with the health of the nation, Kovalevskii and others succeeded in infusing pseudo-medical texts with conservative political ideology.<sup>88</sup> Neurasthenia was seized on by Slavophiles because it seemed to describe in familiar terms the ills suffered by an intelligentsia that had lost touch with its Russian roots. Moreover, the language of neurasthenia overlapped to a significant degree with the rhetoric of health and sickness already adopted by Slavophile critics.

In classical Slavophile theory, the harmoniousness and spiritual unity typified by the peasant commune might be corrupted by an unhealthy belief in the necessity of rational thought and individual autonomy, leading to a “diseased state” that could be “cured” only by embracing traditional Orthodox values. Unlike Europeans, who try to unify their fractured lives by force of reason, Russians are characterized by a “constant striving toward total integrity of moral forces”.<sup>89</sup> Without a certain number of “integrated personalities” among the educated classes, a whole country “might consist entirely of people with shattered nerves, without a single person endowed with a healthy spinal column”.<sup>90</sup> In other words, the diseased state of the Russian intellectual had come to be associated with nerves almost thirty years before neurasthenia took root in Russia. The source of the malady was not mental or physical over-exertion—the upper classes were notorious for their inability to find

<sup>85</sup> P I Kovalevskii, *Vyrozhdienie i vozrozhdenie*, St Petersburg, Tip. M I Akinfieva i I V Leont’eva, 1903, p. 16.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>87</sup> See Andrezej Walicki, *The Slavophile controversy. History of a conservative utopia in nineteenth-century Russian thought*, trans. Hilda Andrews-Rusiecka, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 1989, p. 472.

<sup>88</sup> Robert Nye examines a similar phenomenon in France in his book *Crime, madness, & politics in modern France*, Princeton University Press, 1984. See also Joan Burbick, *Healing the republic:*

*the language of health and the culture of nationalism in nineteenth-century America*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

<sup>89</sup> I V Kireevskii, ‘O kharaktere prosveshchenii Evropy i o ego otnoshenii k prosveshcheniiu Rossii’, in *Izbrannye stat’i*, Moscow, Sovremennik, 1984, pp. 199–238, p. 234.

<sup>90</sup> P V Annenkov, ‘Literaturnyi tip slabogo cheloveka’, *Vospominaniia i kriticheskie ocherki 1849–1868 gg.*, St Petersburg, Tip. M. Stasiulevicha, 1879, 150–72, p. 150. Annenkov himself was a Westernizer; he presents this point of view with a certain degree of irony.

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a productive occupation—but rather lay in what Aleksei Khomiakov called “society’s profound loss of faith in itself and in the people from whom it had torn itself away”.<sup>91</sup> Sergei Aksakov in his ‘Notes on angling’ (1847) wrote of the “contemptuous lack of faith in one’s own strength, firmness of will and purity of intentions—this epidemic of our age, this black impotence of the spirit that is *alien to the healthy nature of the Russian*, but that is visited upon us for our sins”.<sup>92</sup>

This same “lack of faith” finds its way into the rhetoric of neurasthenia some forty years later. In an 1887 speech at the First Congress of Russian Psychiatrists, I P Merzheevskii’s inventory of “conditions conducive to the development of nervous and mental diseases in Russia” includes factors associated with the “inner life of the country”—reforms, the development of trade and industry, wars, overly demanding schools and “shaky morals”—to be corrected by means of “the development in society of noble aspirations, a concept of happiness, and faith in the possibility of life after death”, “moderation in life”, “development of mind and feeling”, and “a strengthening of faith in a better life on earth”.<sup>93</sup>

Although the reforms of the 1860s put an end to Slavophilism as a coherent philosophy,<sup>94</sup> Slavophile ideas—along with medical metaphors to describe them—filtered into the writings of other groups such as the Populists and Panslavists. Nikolai Danilevskii, who was to become the most prominent of the Panslavists, devoted an entire chapter of *Rossiiia i Evropa* (Russia and Europe) (1871) to “the disease of Europeanization”. According to Danilevskii, the history of the world is the history of the life cycles of individual cultural-historical “types” that are born, flourish, decline and die in accordance with natural laws that apply equally to human history and the natural world. With the “Romano-germanic” or “European” type now in decline, the Slavic type, with Russia at its centre, was destined to rise to prominence in economic, artistic, moral and religious spheres. In contrast to Europe, the Russian people and the Russian state are characterized by “spiritual and political health”, but this state of health is “incomplete”. Danilevskii goes on to describe Russia’s affliction in terms strikingly similar to the language later used to describe neurasthenia:

It does not suffer, it is true, from incurable organic afflictions, from which there is no escape other than ethnographic disintegration; but it is, none the less, suffering from a serious illness, which can become just as destructive, exhausting the organism, depriving it of productive capabilities. This disease is all the more terrible, since . . . it confers a cast of decrepitude onto the face of the Russian social body, still so full of life, and threatens it, if not with death, then with something worse than death—fruitless and impotent existence.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Quoted by Walicki, *op. cit.*, note 87 above, p. 342; his translation.

<sup>92</sup> S T Aksakov, ‘Zapiski ob uzhen’e ryby’, in *Sobranie sochinenii v 4kh tomakh*, Moscow, Khudozh. lit., 1956, vol. 4, 5–143, p. 11; my emphasis.

<sup>93</sup> A P Dragomanov, ‘Pervyi s’ezd russkikh psikhiatrov’, *Arkhiv psikhiatrii, neurologii i sudebnoi psikhopatologii*, 1887, 9: 123–5, p. 124.

<sup>94</sup> Walicki, *op. cit.*, note 87 above, p. 470.

<sup>95</sup> Nikolai Danilevskii, *Rossiiia i Evropa*, New York, Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1966, p. 283.

According to Danilevskii, Russia has long been too susceptible to foreign ideas, without regard for native values and traditions. Peter the Great was right to recognize the value of Western cultural achievements, but he acted precipitously in trying to turn Russia into Europe: “[Enlightenment] should have been developed from within, not grafted from without. Its course would have been slower, but truer and more fruitful.”<sup>96</sup> Russian intellectuals, who have lost touch with the true spirit of the Russian people, are likewise guilty of propagating the “disease of Europeanization” by “grinding up in their heads and rehashing with their tongues current ideas that are in vogue at a given moment under the label ‘modern’”.<sup>97</sup>

For later medical commentators, the Russian tendency to latch on to ideas too quickly was seen as a major cause of neurasthenia. Compare, for example, Andrei Popov’s analysis of why Russians might be more susceptible to neurasthenia than other nationalities:

Although we Russians belong to the ranks of northern peoples, none the less our society is more prone to all sorts of infatuations and illusions than any other. Once we take an interest in a phenomenon or idea, we devote ourselves to it fully, closing our eyes to facts, contradictions, inconsistencies; we attempt to put into practice the fruits of our temporary infatuation. It is in our character to grab hold of a hypothesis and adjust it to fit the facts. But reality is often unyielding and bitterly defeats us. As a result, no one more quickly loses faith in themselves, and in everything that intimately concerns them and surrounds them, than we. From there it is only half a step to neurasthenia.<sup>98</sup>

From our vantage point, Popov’s view is almost comically self-referential, for surely neurasthenia is a prime example of a hypothesis which, despite “facts, contradictions and inconsistencies”, has been “adjusted to fit the facts”. But a contemporary reader would more likely have recognized a different subtext: the “fruits of our temporary infatuation” might just as easily refer to the “nihilism, aristocratism, democratism and constitutionalism” that Danilevskii cites as among the most common symptoms of Europeanization.<sup>99</sup>

In his 1892 *Vvedenie k patologii nevrozov* (Introduction to the pathology of neuroses), P I Uspenskii expresses a similar view: Russian intellectuals, while highly educated, are often “incapable of independent activity”. Russian scholars rely for their material on topics introduced by foreigners, and “they themselves, with very few exceptions, are incapable of even appreciating independent thought”.<sup>100</sup> Again, the very process of accumulating too many undigested foreign ideas can have the same effect on “psychic centres” as various chronic diseases, leading to “nervous exhaustion”. The problem, according to Uspenskii, can be traced to overstimulation during early schooling, which turns out children suffering from “an overabundance of knowledge” but lacking the capacity for “translating impressions from the passive sector of the psychic centres to the active”. The sad result is that Russians get tired

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 287.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 440.

<sup>98</sup> Popov, op. cit., note 83 above, p. 24.

<sup>99</sup> Danilevskii, op. cit., note 95 above, pp. 316–17.

<sup>100</sup> Uspenskii, op. cit., note 41 above, p. 59.

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out at an early age. By age sixty, when foreigners are still “full of life energy”, Russians already “begin to fall asleep”.<sup>101</sup>

The notion that Russians live fast and age more quickly than Europeans was yet another facet of existing stereotypes of Russian national character that readily found its way into discussions of neurasthenia. As proof that Beard was mistaken in excluding Russians from the ranks of the neurasthenic, Rudolf Arndt quotes a Russian journal article claiming that “nowhere does a person exhaust himself so quickly” as in Russia. A Russian can lead a battalion at eighteen, undertake a murder investigation at twenty, decide the fate of millions and the interests of the state at twenty-five, but at forty or fifty, when Western Europeans are in their prime, a Russian is already old and useless. According to Arndt, further evidence that Russians are easily excited, easily exhausted and easily “used up” can be found in press accounts of current events and in literary works by Turgenev.<sup>102</sup>

### The Roots of Russian Nervousness

While Arndt’s knowledge of Russian literature quite likely began and ended with Turgenev, he was right to direct our attention toward literary models, for Russians have long been notorious for their tendency to write about fictional characters as though they were real people. Beginning with the critical essays of Vissarion Belinsky in the 1830s, literary works were routinely critiqued on the basis of the moral qualities of their characters, particularly during times of rigid censorship when literature and literary criticism were the sole outlets for political debate. Conclusions about the psychology of various segments of Russian society were often based on the analysis of literary characters rather than clinical cases.<sup>103</sup> “Society”, wrote Pavel Annenkov in 1858, “even thinks in terms of literary types so that an image beloved by the public can serve as a barometer that allows us easily to gauge the state of mind of many thousands of people”.<sup>104</sup>

To an extent unparalleled in the West, educated Russians shared a common catalogue, so to speak, of psychological “types” drawn from literature. Particularly among the ranks of the so-called “superfluous men”—ineffectual intellectuals constrained either by societal conditions or weakness of character from finding a productive position in society—Russians recognized some of the purported symptoms of neurasthenia. In the neurasthenic who “is incapable of successfully taking care of his affairs” and “feels fatigued and unrefreshed by sleep”<sup>105</sup> the Russian reader recognized Goncharov’s Oblomov, that most superfluous of literary characters who spends the first chapter of the novel trying to get out of bed. And the patient whose “will weakens with every passing day, losing its strength and turning to complete

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>102</sup> Arndt, *op. cit.*, note 64 above, p. 25.

<sup>103</sup> Alex Kozulin, ‘Life as authoring: the humanistic tradition in Russian psychology’, *New Ideas in Psychology*, 1991, 9: 335–51, p. 337. As Kozulin points out, Ovsianiko-Kulikovskii “spent

just two lines of the introduction [to his 1910 *History of the Russian intelligentsia*] to justify his choice of literary characters as exclusive representatives of Russian thought”.

<sup>104</sup> Annenkov, *op. cit.*, note 90 above, p. 153.

<sup>105</sup> Belitskii, *op. cit.*, note 18 above, p. 18.

indecision”<sup>106</sup> seemed to suffer from the same “Hamletism” as Turgenev’s *Hamlet of Shchigrovsk* or Lermontov’s Pechorin in *A hero of our time*.<sup>107</sup> Upon closer inspection, none of these characters fully conforms to the clinical picture of a neurasthenic, even as described in Russian accounts. But the many points of contact between neurasthenia and the literary myth of the “diseased” Russian intellectual exerted a powerful influence on the shape the new disease would take.

The opposition between the unhealthy city and wholesome countryside was another such point of contact mediated by literature. In the hands of nineteenth-century Russian writers, this typical Romantic notion took on a more specifically national form: the “rootless” Russian intellectual could recover his connection with the Russian “soil” only by surrendering himself to nature. Turgenev, though a confirmed Westernizer, shared with the Slavophiles a faith in the salutary effects of the Russian countryside, even while rejecting their idealization of the Russian peasant and pre-Petrine patriarchal social structures. When Lavretskii, the main character of *A nest of the gentry*, finds himself alone on an old country estate he thinks to himself, “What strength there is all around, what health in this motionless quiet!” While life elsewhere “seethed, raced and roared”, life in the country “flowed along silently”, evoking in him a “deep and strong feeling for his homeland”.<sup>108</sup> It is this swell of national feeling that sets apart the Russian experience of the restorative power of nature from the standard rest cure for shattered nerves. This is not to say that when Russian physicians prescribed a sojourn in the country as a cure for neurasthenia, they were making a political statement. But by the end of the nineteenth century, mention of the Russian countryside would carry with it the weight of the entire Slavophile/Westernizer polemic, of which it had become an integral part.

The cityscape, too, came with its own set of cultural associations. As a “disease of civilization” brought on by a confrontation with technology, neurasthenia was clearly conceived as an urban ailment. As we have seen, Russian commentators to some extent followed Western Europeans in using neurasthenia as a springboard for addressing issues of public health associated with urban life, while at the same time expanding the purview of the disease beyond the educated upper and middle classes, who had been the sole victims of the American version. But the notion of the “city” in Russia was inseparable from the cultural mythology of its two capitals: Moscow, the seat of Russian Orthodoxy and traditional “heart” of Russian culture and St Petersburg, its Europeanized “head”—and the logical dwelling place for the diseased Russian intellectual. Moulded by several generations of Russian writers, the myth of the city that rose from the swamp on the bones of serfs to become home to an army of petty bureaucrats was by now firmly lodged in the popular imagination. Pushkin’s “Bronze Horseman” juxtaposes a paean to the grand design of Peter’s

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 35; quoted without attribution from Maurice de Fleury, *Manuel pour l'étude des maladies du système nerveux*, Paris, F Alcan, 1904, p. 839.

<sup>107</sup> Walicki, op. cit., note 87 above, p. 354; S Shevyrev, “*Geroi nashego vremeni*” (review), *Moskvitianin*, 1841: 528–38, p. 538. That Hamlet himself was neurasthenic is confirmed by Nordau,

who claims that “we can to this day still diagnose without hesitation Hamlet’s weakness of will through nervous exhaustion”. Nordau, op. cit., note 77 above, p. 355.

<sup>108</sup> I S Turgenev, *Sobranie sochinenii v dvenadtsati tomakh*, Moscow, Gos. izd. khudozh. lit., 1954, vol. 2, p. 204.

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“window on Europe” with the story of a hapless clerk who imagines in his madness that he is pursued by the tsar’s equestrian statue. Gogol’s stories warn the reader not to believe in the illusory city, where mysterious forces seethe under the apparent logic of its rectilinear avenues. The young Dostoevskii wrote of country life as an antidote to “sick, strange and gloomy Petersburg, in which youth perishes so quickly, hopes fade so quickly, health is so quickly ruined”.<sup>109</sup> In his later writings, this “most abstract and intentional city on earth”<sup>110</sup> is the only possible setting for the ongoing battle between reason and faith for characters from the “Underground Man” to Raskolnikov.

To a Russian with Slavophile or Populist sympathies, St Petersburg had come to represent the unhappy consequence of the forcible imposition of alien ideas on native soil; to a conservative psychiatrist, it was both source and symptom of that scourge of modern life, neurasthenia. Thus it is that Kovalevskii, in his 1894 *Nervnye bolezni nashego obshchestva* (Nervous diseases of our society), discusses the strain inflicted on the nervous system not only by cities in general, but by St Petersburg in particular, where nine out of ten people are nervous, spending most of their time in a manner “completely contrary to the laws of God and man”. Its residents “despise nature” and in turn are “cruelly punished” by it. In Kovalevskii’s description, the entire city resembles an organism on the verge of exhausting its “nerve force”: “Leave Petersburg for fifty years without renewing it with freshly arrived juices from the provinces and it will degenerate completely. Why? Because it has no sun, because life is set up in such a way that even the sickly sun that is visible is not seen by the residents of Petersburg because they sleep through it.”<sup>111</sup>

The second half of Kovalevskii’s book is devoted to a fictional “case history” in which the “French disease” (presumably syphilis) in one generation leads first to neurasthenia and then to a variety of other ailments in successive generations. Although one member of the third generation succeeds—with the help of German schooling and lots of fresh air—in “overcoming his heredity”, his seemingly healthy son is still wanting in moral development. He lacks not only “a feeling of his own self worth”, but, more importantly, “a living consciousness of belonging to a great common whole—his homeland and humanity—to which he ought to devote his activities”. He had heard of these “higher moral concepts”, but they failed to “live in him”, remaining nothing but “empty sounds”.<sup>112</sup> While Kovalevskii is clearly kin to European commentators who used neurasthenia as an explanation for both moral decay and national decline, his emphasis on the “great common whole” so familiar from Slavophile rhetoric gives his version of degeneration theory a decidedly Russian twist. Lest there be any doubt as to the source of Russia’s neuroses, he ends his book with a final excursus on Petersburg:

<sup>109</sup> Fedor Dostoevskii, ‘Peterburgskaia letopis’ (1847), in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh*, Leningrad, Nauka, 1978, vol. 18, pp. 11–38, on p. 34.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 101.

<sup>111</sup> Kovalevskii, *op. cit.*, note 81 above, p. 52. Urban health problems in St Petersburg were a

common topic among medical writers pressing for improvements in living and working conditions, including the Swiss physician F F Erisman, who publicized the state of St Petersburg basement apartments in an 1871 article. Frieden, *op. cit.*, note 53 above, p. 82.

<sup>112</sup> Kovalevskii, *op. cit.*, note 81 above, p. 116.

The life of our society is carried on most foolishly. We live at night, even though we could just as easily live during the day. We almost always ride when we could just as easily walk. We eat too much, drink things that are harmful, knowingly do things that are dangerous to the health . . . And all of this we do with good humour . . . We do it for pleasure, but it leads to sickness! . . .

Need I talk about life in Petersburg? . . . Petersburg is Sodom and Gomorrah. The capital of a great empire, it is every bit as ruinous as the state sustaining it is great. It is a fiery life in which all the juices of the state are consumed. State money goes in and never returns. The best comestibles go in, but no one grows fat from them. Human sacrifices go in and never return. Look, does Petersburg really live by its own powers? . . . Thousands of people arrive there from other parts of the empire and serve it so that their progeny might perish irrevocably. It is a city built on bones and supported by human bones . . . Petersburg has not existed, does not exist and will not exist, because all its living conditions point towards extinction.

In Petersburg there is no sun. You could charge admission for showing the Petersburg sun, it's such a rarity. In Petersburg there is no air. In Petersburg there is no light, no space, no life. . . . There is only vegetative existence. People have turned day into night and night into day . . . In Petersburg people eat a lot and drink even more. In Petersburg people work beyond their strength, but they blabber even more. A person who leads a Petersburg life and receives petitioners at 8 AM must have prodigious powers of mind and body . . . Given such a life, can we really expect health, the continuation of the race, the strengthening of society? . . . Never—degeneration is its fate.<sup>113</sup>

If we recall Beard's original description of neurasthenia, we cannot help but be struck by the degree to which the myth of neurasthenia has been transformed. In place of brainworkers, we find bureaucrats; in place of the trappings of modern civilization, we find a dissolute lifestyle that predated Beard by at least half a century; in place of Beard's faith in progress, we find a fear of degeneration tied specifically to the locus of forced Westernization.

By the beginning of the next century, many of the symptoms and sub-types of neurasthenia had been reinterpreted as separate organic or psychological diseases, with the result that its existence as a separate clinical entity was increasingly being called into question.<sup>114</sup> Already in 1910 Vladimir Chizh followed the example of his Western counterparts in questioning the expanding definition and widespread diagnosis of neurasthenia. Paradoxically, Chizh used an exposé of neurasthenia as a pretext for espousing conservative views markedly similar to those of Kovalevskii, but couching his description of the apparently degenerate state of the Russian intelligentsia in moral rather than biological terms. For Chizh, neurasthenia is a convenient explanation for laziness, cowardice and "moral flabbiness" invoked by intellectuals worn out not by mental exertion, but by card playing and profligacy, "for whom the questions 'Was ist Sehnsucht? Was ist Stern?' seem to be empty".<sup>115</sup>

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>114</sup> John C Chatel and Roger Peele, 'The concept of neurasthenia', *Int. J. Psychiat.*, 1970/71, 9: 36–49, p. 38; P Pichot, 'History of neurasthenia', in Gastpar and Kielholz, *op. cit.*, note 6 above, pp. 16–20; Sartorius, *op. cit.*, note 6 above, p. 22; Barbara Sicherman, 'The uses of a

diagnosis: doctors, patients, and neurasthenia', *J. Hist. med. Allied Sci.*, 1977, 32: 33–54, pp. 35–6.

<sup>115</sup> V F Chizh, 'K ucheniiu o nevrastenii', *Vrachebnaia Gazeta*, 1910, 3–5; 53–5; 123–5; 159–60; 197–9; 233–4; 292–4, p. 55.

These self-proclaimed neurasthenics are “typical representative[s] of the intelligentsia”, many of whom cite their imagined condition as evidence that they “don’t belong to the vulgar [*poshlyi*], self-satisfied masses”.<sup>116</sup> Echoing Kovalevskii’s call for strength of will and firmness of character, Chizh opposes these effete intellectuals to people with “ideal aspirations” who find within themselves “strength for the struggle against what Nietzsche so aptly called ‘the shameful softening of feelings’”.<sup>117</sup>

When he finishes stripping away the mantle of medical legitimacy that had cloaked the concept of neurasthenia for some thirty years, Chizh exposes the same mythological underpinnings that had attracted conservative psychiatrists to the disease in the first place. It is as though the “type” of the superfluous man had passed through the prism of medical science and re-emerged in Russian cultural consciousness in the form of a new—but still recognizable—“type”: the neurasthenic. Even as the word “neurasthenic” becomes rarer in the pages of the Russian medical press, it begins to crop up more frequently elsewhere, eventually landing on stage, where it gained new life as the theatrical *emploi* known as the “actor-neurasthenic”. As early as 1902 in the short play *Nevrasteniki* (The neurasthenics), Aleksandr Pleshcheev satirizes a society of idlers preoccupied with the state of their nerves. A character who is described in the stage directions as having “no occupation whatsoever” is given a dressing down in terms that make explicit the link between the modern day neurasthenic and his literary forebears: “[I]n principle, your life is of use to no one but you; to everyone else it is superfluous”.<sup>118</sup> Even within the medical community, neurasthenia ceased to be the property of the few conservatives remaining in the profession. Instead, it was frequently invoked in various guises by mainly left-leaning psychiatrists in debates about the health effects of revolutionary activity.<sup>119</sup>

In the end, all that remained of Beard’s theory was the framework of a disease afflicting primarily the intelligentsia that was specifically tied to national identity and whose symptoms included passivity and lack of will—a framework that corresponded to a large degree with the mythology of the diseased intellectual already firmly embedded in the Russian imagination by half a century of literary images and Slavophile polemics. In Russian medical commentary of the 1880s and 1890s, the weight of that mythology at times overwhelmed the nascent language of neurological

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122. Chizh’s distinction between “true” and “imagined” neurasthenia recalls Alexander Herzen’s rant against the “volunteer” [*volnoopredeliashchiesia*] superfluous men of the 1850s and 1860s. According to Herzen, the Onegin and Pechorins of the 1830s and 1840s had “expressed the true sorrow and dislocation of Russian life of the time”, but they were a phenomenon confined to the era of Nicholas I. By 1860 they had been replaced by “bewildered youths with weakened nerves”, who are incapable of work and who “hope to receive *gratis* the solution to their difficulties and answers to questions which they have never succeeded in formulating clearly”. Alexander Herzen, ‘Lishnie liudi i zhelcheviki’, in *Sobranie sochinenii v*

*tridsati tomakh*, Moscow, Izd. ANSSSR, 1958, vol. 14, pp. 317–27, on p. 317. See also his article ‘Very dangerous’ (English title in original), *ibid.*, pp. 116–21.

<sup>117</sup> Chizh, *op. cit.*, note 115 above, p. 124.

<sup>118</sup> Aleksandr Pleshcheev, *Nevrasteniki*, St Petersburg, Izd. zhurnala *Teatra i iskusstva*, 1902, p. 5

<sup>119</sup> See Julie V Brown, ‘Revolution and psychosis: the mixing of science and politics in Russian psychiatric medicine, 1905–13’, *Russian Rev.*, 1987, 46: 283–302; Laura Engelstein, *The keys to happiness: sex and the search for modernity in fin-de-siècle Russia*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1992, pp. 255–64.

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science, leading medical writers—particularly those of a conservative political bent—to fill in the blank spaces of neurasthenia with elements of the older myth until the two were indistinguishable. So it was that the neurasthenic who stepped from the pages of the Russian medical press to begin life in the new century would carry with him the legacy of his nineteenth-century predecessors: lack of faith, lack of moral integrity and lack of national feeling.