

I *Two Names*

It seems to be Russia's fate that the man with understanding will never work, and all the work will be done by those who have none. (D. S. Mirsky, 1920)

RUSSIA'S RULERS AND RUSSIA'S RULED

The Russia in which Mirsky grew up, between the recovery from the Crimean war and the war against Japan in 1904–5, was a mighty world power.¹ Formally, the country was an absolute monarchy, and as such widely held by natives and foreigners alike to be an embarrassing anachronism. Mirsky's father and several close male relatives on both sides of his family were highly placed members of the tiny élite that governed it, and his mother moved in Court circles; their son was inevitably brought up to follow in his father's footsteps. Mirsky's sense of his country's status was fundamental to his mentality; and he was never allowed to forget his origins even if he wished to himself.

The basis of Russia's status was its sheer size, territorial and human. The population of the Empire shot up from about 117 million in the year of Mirsky's birth to about 175 million by 1914. Only just over half of these people were Great Russians, and increasing ethnic diversity represented one of the government's thorniest problems during this time. His father's career in the Ministry of the Interior continuously confronted Mirsky with the problems of multi-culturalism; the family papers suggest that such matters were discussed at home rather than being left behind at father's office. Nationalism—and in particular the vexed questions of the proper place of the Great Russians in their empire, before and after 1917, and the proper place of Russia in the world—was to be a constant factor among Mirsky's intellectual concerns. His Oriental eyes and black hair, the first things mentioned by everybody who described his appearance, bore witness to his country's complicated ethnic history.

Aristocratic Russians born about 1890, the year Mirsky came into the world, formed the pointed head on a social torso that was very broad at the bottom. This organism is usually said to have consisted of three elements: the few rulers and the many ruled, who on the whole did not talk to each other, and those between them—the unruly intelligentsia—who talked to neither but told the world about both.²

The princely families of ancient lineage such as Mirsky's formed a tiny enclave intertwined with but separable—in their own minds especially—from

the ruling class (for want of a better term) of pre-revolutionary Russia, the *dvoryanstvo*. Usually called the ‘gentry’ in English and sometimes, just as misleadingly, the ‘nobility’, this group was by no means homogeneous. It consisted of several sub-sets distinguishable from each other in terms of wealth and lineage. The *dvoryanstvo* derived its status from state service, which provided a non-hereditary entrée into it. A helpful account of the *dvoryanstvo* in Mirsky’s time was set down by an Englishman who came to know him well, who spent a lot of time in Russia, and who—a rare accomplishment at the time—had an active command of spoken Russian, the Hon. Maurice Baring (1874–1945). Attempting to explain who ruled Russia, Baring comments: ‘Any one can get into the governing class, that is true; but nobody who is not in it can check its action, and at one period nobody could even criticize it. The result is the triumph of bureaucracy at the expense of any kind of democracy or of any kind of aristocracy; while the only thing that profits by it is arbitrary despotism.’³ Mirsky was born into this ‘excluded’ aristocracy. But his father and grandfather both rose to the top of the triumphant bureaucracy. As for democracy, Mirsky never seems to have had any respect for what Western European liberals like Baring understood by this concept, much less its more novel manifestations (women’s suffrage, for example). Mirsky died at the hands of a successor despotism that he consciously chose to serve, but which operated in a manner more arbitrary and unchecked than anything Baring could ever have imagined.

Next below the *dvoryanstvo*, and partly overlapping with it, came a social group that Mirsky did more to make familiar to the English reader than any other commentator, and about which more is commonly known than about any other Russian social group, because of its function as the engine of high culture. This was the intelligentsia, a highly diversified body of people even more difficult to define precisely than the *dvoryanstvo*. Maurice Baring offered his readers of 1914 a well-informed chapter on this subject too, dwelling on the complexity of the phenomenon.⁴ For Baring, the intelligentsia meant first and foremost ‘the representatives of the liberal professions—lawyers, doctors, professors, literary men, agricultural experts, statisticians [i.e. statisticians], schoolmasters, journalists’. In the two fields listed here that boasted the most women at the time in Russia, literature and schoolteaching, Baring’s language unthinkingly emphasizes men only. Harold Williams (1876–1928), the shrewdest foreign observer of Russia at the time and a mentor of Mirsky in London, was married to an outstanding female from the Russian intelligentsia, and he was much more inclusive in speaking of the intelligentsia’s practical social work: ‘Women worked side by side with men on a basis of complete equality, and frequently were leaders in organisation; in fact, one of the remarkable features of the intelligentsia was the number of strong and able women it brought to the front.’⁵

Baring also represented the intelligentsia as ‘the intellectual middle class’,

and saw it as divided into the 'educated' and the 'half-educated'. From the half-educated majority of the Russian intelligentsia, asserted Baring, came the revolutionaries, and about them he makes an observation that has direct relevance to Mirsky's views and conduct:

They were as simple and as natural in their assassinations and their martyrdom as they were in the rest of their behaviour. [They exhibited] no mockery, no irony, but an inverted and inflexible logic which leads people to disregard all barriers and to carry out what they preach in theory, though they should cause the pillars of the world to fall crashing to the ground.⁶

However much he might have denigrated the radical intelligentsia and denied his kinship with it, Mirsky came to share this characteristic maximalism; the combination of this tendency with the tradition of public service in the families of his parents went a long way towards making him what he was.

Writing about Russian literature for the English reading public in 1925, Mirsky himself spoke of 'the current and superficial idea of Russia as a peasant country'.⁷ However, it would be difficult to deny the validity of this idea in quantitative terms when speaking of the country in which he grew up. In the book he devoted to Russian society, Mirsky gave a cogent account of the changes in the sociological composition of the peasant masses as industrialization and urbanization went forward.⁸ But peasants engaged in agriculture still made up about three-quarters of the empire's population during Mirsky's childhood; the intricately handcrafted Fabergé eggs commissioned by the rich were paid for more than anything else by exporting grain produced by mass peasant toil, which like that of the egg-makers was performed largely without benefit of machinery. Mirsky hardly encountered any of these toilers personally, except as servants and rank-and-file soldiery, and he never spoke of them in anything other than abstract terms, as an undifferentiated mass.⁹ To his credit, unlike so many other intellectuals he never posed as one of the common people or attributed wonder-working wisdom to them. Saintly long-suffering and endurance, identified *ad nauseam* as the supreme virtue of the Russian people both by their own apprehensive rulers and by fascinated foreigners, were for Mirsky despicable. He called Platon Karataev, the peasant guru in *War and Peace*, 'difficult to put up with': 'He is an abstraction, a myth, a being with different dimensions and laws from those of the rest of the novel.'¹⁰ The only person of indisputably humble social origins whom Mirsky dealt with as anything but servant or soldier before he moved among the proletarian intelligentsia of the USSR fifteen years or so after the revolution was Maksim Gorky (1868–1936), who had emerged from a provincial family of artisans. As one of the few members of the intelligentsia who really knew what he was talking about in this respect, Gorky heartily detested such people, along with the 'dark' Russian peasantry as a whole.

BUREAUCRACY AND CONSTITUTIONALISM

Vladimir Nabokov, who was born nine years later than Mirsky, created in his autobiographical writings about his childhood an influential myth of nostalgia for paradise lost; the Russians themselves now tend to favour this myth over the one of paradise gained that was promoted in Soviet ideology.¹¹ Neither the peasants nor Russia's upper classes had good reason to enjoy that sense of idyllic stability and prosperity that Nabokov evoked, and which is frequently ascribed to their contemporaries in Western Europe before the calamity of 1914 began to overthrow the old order. Rather than being a long, leisurely, golden holiday, the childhood of these Russians is more adequately understood in retrospect as a time of wrenching social and economic change, the 'transition to modernity' of accelerated urbanization and industrialization. Some large-scale natural disasters stretched the social fabric, chief among them the catastrophic famine of 1891-2.¹² In its wake came yet another of the cholera epidemics that had regularly scourged Russia since the eighteenth century.

What we now sometimes call 'the transition to modernity' in its political aspect was summed up by Harold Williams as a power struggle between bureaucracy and constitutionalism,¹³ the former frequently articulated as police repression and the latter as subversion, with both often involving physical violence. The violence was due partly to acts of terror by individuals or small groups, as when Prime Minister Stolypin was assassinated in 1911, and partly to popular risings, as in the events of January 1905 that had direct consequences for the Svyatopolk-Mirsky family. The violence that gave the word 'pogrom' to the English language led to the emigration of two million Jews from the Russian Empire in the period immediately before 1914. At the same time, millions of Russian peasants emigrated internally, eastwards along the newly built railway to Siberia and the Pacific. This railway was later put to a more sinister use, of vital political and economic importance: Mirsky became one of the millions of prisoners who made a one-way journey along it to the eastern extremity of the GULag during the 1930s.

When the Russians born around 1890 were in their middle teens, their country went through the traumatic war with Japan. Having in mind mainly the military technology of the two sides, another of Mirsky's English mentors, Bernard Pares (1867-1949), asserted that 'European Japan defeated Asiatic Russia', and pointed out that the Japanese were fighting for their lives, whereas the Russians were fighting for a political purpose few could believe in—the acquisition of an eastern empire to compensate for the expansion in Central Asia that the British had stymied since the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁴ Military failure on the Pacific precipitated the inconclusive but destabilizing revolution of 1905.

Under the premiership of Stolypin between 1906 and 1911—he began by restoring order in a fairly unceremonious way with knout and noose—the

country seemed to be pulling itself together. The three successive Dumas introduced a tentatively representative element into government, and the country groped its way towards reforms that would bring about some sort of social reconciliation based on private rather than collective ownership of land by the peasants. If there was ever any golden age, it was enjoyed during these few years, when Mirsky was in his late teens and early twenties. The economic boom they saw was underwritten in a way that led Mirsky, always nationally conscious, to assert in 1929, just before the Wall Street crash reinforced his nascent Marxism:

The banks [after 1905–6] came under predominantly foreign control. The heavy industries were likewise mainly owned by foreign shareholders. By 1914 Russia had gone a good part of the way towards becoming a semi-colonial possession of European capital. The prevalence of French, Belgian, and English over German capital in Russian investments was such that quite apart from the imperialistic appetites of her bourgeoisie, Russia had no choice but to fight on the side of the Entente.¹⁵

The president of one of the biggest of these banks, the Anglo-Russian, was an uncle of Mirsky's on his mother's side of the family, the immensely rich Bobrinskys. What seems to have mattered more to Mirsky at the time he was actually living through this period, though, was the high cultural scene in St Petersburg. Several factors combined to inject new vitality into it during his teenage years after the decline—a phenomenon of the kind that Mirsky was fond of referring to as a 'falling line'—that had followed the demise of the great novelists in the 1880s. Russian culture opened itself up both to foreign influences and to its own ancient past. Poetry reasserted itself after having been sidelined by prose since the early 1840s. A temporary erosion of censorship relaxed the watch on the gates¹⁶ at the same time as the mass production of reading matter and other commodities was challenging élitist assumptions about what culture was and by whom it should properly be 'consumed'.¹⁷ The Orthodox Church seemed to be losing what little was left of its authority, although its rituals were still widely observed.¹⁸ Under the last Tsar there was indeed a marked rise in religiosity in public life, promoted by the imperial couple and their various unsavoury advisers.¹⁹ Among the intelligentsia, though, experimentally unorthodox ethical teachings and practices gained ground. All this made Mirsky fairly unshockable and uncensorious with regard to the private lives of the people he knew, though he did retain an aristocratic touchiness about personal honour.

A series of cataclysms began in August 1914, and went on for almost a decade. For the Russians, the Great War against Germany was a humiliating disaster, and apart from immense physical suffering it led to revolutionary social discontent, the downfall of the monarchy, the Bolshevik seizure of power, foreign intervention, and one of the most savage civil wars in history. As a result, the social torso of Russia was beheaded. The upper-class survivors

who managed to get out of the country were left with their wits, their cosmopolitan education, and their connections—plus the proceeds from the Fabergé eggs and such that they might have succeeded in smuggling out on their persons. Very few of the *émigrés* managed in fact to retain much of their money, possessions, and influence. A knowledge of at least one modern language other than Russian was the only negotiable advantage that most of them derived from their upbringing. The professions of the men were rarely marketable outside Russia,²⁰ and they were reduced to bartering their bodies rather than their minds to earn their daily bread. For the women, this situation was business as usual, of course, but in an unfamiliar social context.

Argument will never cease about whether what happened in Russia was—for example—inevitable, foreseeable, comprehensible, desirable, reversible; argument will never cease about the kind of Russia that would have resulted if events had taken a different turn.²¹ The ultimate reasons for the Russian plunge into extremism remain inscrutable; the obsessive search for such things as ultimate reasons is perhaps itself a manifestation of this accursed extremism. But there can be no doubt that the feature pinpointed by Maurice Baring—the purblind exclusion of all but a tiny élite from political authority and the process of government—was an underlying reason for the disaster. The result of the events following 1914 was that from the standpoint of Europeans and Americans born fifty years or more later than them (apart from the citizens of the former Yugoslavia), people who on the whole have not had to make any life-threatening political decisions, Mirsky's Russian generation of 1890 was faced by an unimaginably categorical series of choices and risks, as their country made the transition from seemingly solid but in the event fragile stability through anarchic violence to the tormented birth of a radically new order.

THE SVYATOPOLK-MIRSKYS

The Svyatopolk-Mirskys were one of the most ancient princely families of Russia, claiming descent from the ninth-century Varangian prince Rurik, conventionally recognized as the founder of the Russian state. At the end of the nineteenth century there were twenty-three clans whose members could with some justice claim to be 'sons of Rurik' (*Ryurikovichi*). Even after the seventy years of Soviet effort to erase their memory, many of these clans still have instant name recognition and inherent glamour among ordinary Russians, in some cases helped by the perfect-pitch variations Tolstoy played in naming his fictional characters: the originals were such as Dolgoruky, Gagarin, Kropotkin, Obolensky, Shcherbatov, and Volkonsky. In these families, the men bore the title 'Prince' (*knyaz'*), their wives that of 'Princess' (*knyaginya*), and their unmarried daughters had their own special grammatical form (*knyazhná*). They were properly addressed as, literally, 'Your Radiance' (*Vashe Siyátel'stvo*).

They were outranked only by the junior members of the ruling Romanov family, who had the adjective ‘Grand’ (*Velikii*) added to their *knyaz*’. There were a dozen of these latter in 1917, of whom only half survived the next two years. The title *knyaz*’ went so far back into the country’s history that its Scandinavian origins (cognate with English ‘king’) were forgotten. It was considerably senior to the title *tsar*’, which had been introduced to designate the Prince who was pre-eminent over the others—and the Romanovs were distinctly parvenus, a family which after all celebrated a mere tercentenary on the throne in 1913, coming out of virtual seclusion for a prodigal feast before the time of plague, presided over by the last of them to sit on the throne of Russia.

Compared with the tribe of Rurik, the families who had been ennobled for services to the Tsar relatively recently—since Peter the Great’s attempts to extirpate medieval (or perhaps primeval) Russia in the early eighteenth century—bore foreign-sounding titles: ‘Count’ (*Graf*), and the loathsomely meritocratic (commerce and wealth!) ‘Baron’ (*Barón*). True, these families included some recognizably ancient Russian lineages who had been slighted during earlier turns of the wheel, such as the Tolstoys. It is not accidental (as the Russians tend to say, earnestly upturning an index finger) that Dostoevsky’s Prince Myshkin is noble and unworldly, even a genuine idiot, while Chekhov’s Tuzenbakh is a petty little fellow, baron though he is. The prince has a surname that derives unmistakably from the homely Russian word for ‘mouse’, while that of the baron is a Teutonic abomination.

The name ‘Svyatopolk’ was borne by the eldest son of St Vladimir of Kiev, who brought Russia into Christianity in 988, and into history along with this son’s name went his sobriquet *Okayánnnyi*, ‘The Accursed’. He earned it because he murdered his half-brothers, two of whom, Boris and Gleb, were later canonized as Christian martyrs. Svyatopolk ‘The Accursed’ seized their appanages, and made common cause with the Poles and Pechenegs against Yaroslav the Wise to seize the throne of Kiev. One of the fratricide Svyatopolk’s descendants was Prince Mikhail Yaroslavovich Svyatopolk (1050–1113), Grand Prince of Kiev. In the thirteenth century came the invasion of Russia by the Mongols, and the Svyatopolk family disappeared into relative obscurity in Poland-Lithuania for several centuries. Svyatopolk ‘The Accursed’ was never forgotten, though; the tag was still used on occasion to taunt D. S. Mirsky.

At least as early as the sixteenth century one branch of the Svyatopolk family had settled in the district of Mir, near the town of Nowogródek in what is now Belarus; the second element of the surname refers to this place, and was added to it less than a century before the October Revolution abolished titles of nobility in Russia. The princely title and compounded surname of the Svyatopolk-Mirskys were ‘recognized’, as the genealogies put it, with reference to Poland by a Senate decree of 1821 and with reference to Russia by one of 1861, the first holder of the title being Thomas-Bogumile-Jean (1788–1868). Poland had

become a Congress Kingdom of the Tsar of Russia, a vassal state, in 1815; and Thomas-Bogumile-Jean was a high government official who represented the Polish Diet in St Petersburg. This was D. S. Mirsky's great-grandfather. He made his career at a time when most of the other sons of Rurik no longer went in for high office; like the intelligentsia that was emerging at about the same time, they looked down on the state-serving bureaucracy.

The two Svyatopolk-Mirsky sons were entirely Russian in respect of upbringing and education, and they followed their father into high-flying service careers. They bore the patronymic Ivanovich, formed from the Russianized last element of the father's Christian name. The elder was D. S. Mirsky's grandfather and namesake, Prince Dmitry Ivanovich (1825-99), a fighting soldier who rose spectacularly to become chief of staff to a great general, the conqueror of the Caucasus, Field Marshal Prince Aleksandr Ivanovich Baryatinsky (1815-79), who was also of the tribe of Rurik. Dmitry Ivanovich eventually became an aide to the Emperor. He also served for a while as Governor-General of Kharkov in Ukraine, and this seems to be the reason for the family's connection with that region. D. I. had a connection with Tolstoy, whom he had met during the Crimean War; in the 1880s, like hundreds of other Russians, he wrote the great man some letters (and a poem!) about religious matters.²²

Dmitry Ivanovich's younger brother, Nikolay Ivanovich Svyatopolk-Mirsky (1833-98), was also a professional soldier; he became ataman of the Don Cossacks and also commanded the élite Semyonov regiment of the Guards. Nikolay Ivanovich had eight sons. The eldest, Ilya, died in infancy, as did the sixth and seventh, Vasily (1877-9) and Pyotr (1881-2); the second, Mikhail (1870-1938), never married. But the other four all had children, and the extant Svyatopolk-Mirskys are their descendants. By 1917, the Svyatopolk-Mirsky clan immediately related to the two Ivanovich patriarchs was very extensive, and widely intermarried with its fellow aristocrats. In emigration, the descendants married non-Russians and their children assimilated, so that in familiar *émigré* fashion there are American, British, French, and Swiss citizens who continue to bear the family name but are Russians in no other respect.

D. S. Mirsky traced some of his family history in one of his youthful poems, a sonnet to which he attached such importance that he placed it last when he collected them. The word 'glory' (*slava*) crops up in it three times. When he comes to his own generation, with modest propriety Mirsky strikes an elegiac but still patrician note, having in mind the fact that he was one of four children, and that therefore the 'clan' would likely continue to reproduce and go on doing good works. How wrong he turned out to be, about this and so much else.

Our Clan

Where did you spring from, bareboned little princes,
Whose clan declined in Batu's heady days?²³

As newcomers or simple Polish gentry
 You found no glory, nor a Senate seat.
 No Lithuanian magnate's crown awaited,—
 A different kind of exploit came to you,
 For it was snowy mountain peaks that crowned you
 With the stern glory of the Russian knight.
 Unknown by both Chodkiéwicz and Sobiéski,²⁴
 Your glory with Baryátinsky ascended,
 And now grows ever higher and more proud,
 In bounteous summer brilliance comes to manhood,
 Thenceforth with easy stateliness in autumn
 To be dispersed over the fecund lea.²⁵

In discussing Pushkin's aristocratic ancestry when writing in English, incidentally, Mirsky sometimes used the word 'race' as the equivalent of the Russian word *rod* that appears in the title of his poem, and sometimes also 'stock',²⁶ both are as useful as the word 'clan' in understanding what he is talking about.

The elder son of Dmitry Ivanovich Svyatopolk-Mirsky was Prince Pyotr Dmitrievich,²⁷ who was born at Vladikavkaz on 6/18 August 1857. He was educated at the Corps de Pages. This was the social summit of the Russian education system. Entry into it was open only to the sons of men in the top two categories of the Table of Ranks; and out of it a gilded high road led directly towards the inner circles of the Imperial Court. Prince Pyotr Dmitrievich graduated in 1874 with first-class honours, upon which he was appointed Page of the Chamber.

Mirsky's father was about the same age as, and would have been at the Corps de Pages with, Tolstoy's fictional Count Vronsky, and *Anna Karenina* stands as the most indelibly memorable portrayal of the way these people lived—or perhaps one should say, with the kind of sensitivity to Tolstoy's agenda that Mirsky displayed, of the ways Tolstoy represented some of them living rightly and others living wrongly. One matter of particular significance in this connection is that the upper-class characters in *Anna Karenina*, which is set in the 1870s, use English as their preferred polite language, where those of the Napoleonic period in *War and Peace* had used French. The turn to English in the *beau monde* of his parents' generation and the persistence of this preference until 1917 was of profound significance for everything Mirsky was later able to achieve as a critic and historian of literature.

Svyatopolk-Mirsky senior, unlike Count Vronsky, served as a front-line officer in the Caucasus rather than going off as a volunteer to seek an honourable death, and he seems never to have done anything drastic in his personal life. Instead, he conducted himself more like Anna's unbending husband Karenin, first on the military side of the career ladder, going by natural succession into the army and becoming a cornet in the Empress's Life Guards

Hussars in 1875. He saw active service in the war against Turkey in 1877-8, and was decorated for his conduct at the battle of Kars (the 'snowy mountain peaks' of his son's poem). Pyotr Dmitrievich's military career then took a turn that was fairly unusual in the case of a man as high-born as he was: selection for the Academy of the General Staff. He passed out in 1881—the year, as we remember, when the 'Tsar-Liberator' was assassinated—and was then appointed to the Imperial Suite; shortly afterwards he was 'nominated to be present for special purposes on the staff of the VII army corps'. He continued his career in the army; by 1884 he was acting commander of the staff of the 31st Infantry Division, and by 1887 commander of the staff of the 3rd Grenadier Division.

To have been both a Guards officer and a graduate of the Academy of the General Staff in late imperial Russia, like P. D. Svyatopolk-Mirsky, was a fairly rare combination. On the one hand, Guards officers formed a self-conscious élite who despised other officers and closed ranks against them. Their status and privileges were 'based on the principle of birth, incompatible with the necessities of a modern army'.²⁸ The reforms introduced by Milyutin in the wake of the Russian defeat in the Crimea attempted to institute education and character rather than birth as criteria for promotion; the Academy of the General Staff was established to foster this change. Guards officers soon became inferior in power and prestige to graduates of the Academy, who were referred to in army slang as *genshtabisty*. Admission to the Academy was by competitive examination after recommendation following four years of commissioned service. P. D. Svyatopolk-Mirsky was thus both an aristocrat and a military meritocrat; and the system that made him such survived just long enough for his son to follow in his footsteps. It is worth noting here that the unwillingness of the *genshtabisty* to stand up for the Tsar and his government was one crucial factor that led to the downfall of the regime in February 1917. During the Civil War that soon followed, D. S. Mirsky served on the staff of the *genshtabist* Denikin, one of the most outstanding non-aristocratic commanders the Academy system had produced.

With that easy transferability between military and civil careers that was understandably suspected and resented by ordinary Russians, and not only by them,²⁹ P. D. Svyatopolk-Mirsky was appointed Governor of Penza in 1895. He moved on to become Governor of Ekaterinoslav in 1897. Penza is a south-central province of European Russia, Ekaterinoslav on the Dnepr in the Ukraine. The office of governor was immensely important in pre-revolutionary Russia; as the local representative of the Tsar, a governor wielded almost absolute power over the people in his district. Such was the nature of the Tsar's trust in these men that those who abused this power were hardly ever brought to book, because the Tsar stood by them when they got into difficulties, understanding that his own absolute power was potentially at issue.

Svyatopolk-Mirsky returned to the capital in 1900 as Deputy Minister of

the Interior and Commander of the Corps of Gendarmes—head of the secret police. He now held the rank of lieutenant-general, the third from the top of the Table. His son once gave an incisive account of the Gendarmes, which had been created by the reactionary Nicholas I, the first years of whose reign in the 1820s

saw the institution of a new body of secret police—the Corps of Gendarmes, whose head was the Emperor's most intimate friend, and which became the most real and omnipresent force in the country. The gendarmes saw to it that no one spoke, thought, or wrote against the established order; they did their work of suppression conscientiously (they were, perhaps, the only incorruptible branch of the administration) and efficiently. The Corps survived till 1917 [when, as Mirsky does not say, but was soon to learn at first hand, it was replaced by a series of much more efficacious bodies].³⁰

Of the twelve ministries that formed the uppermost layer of the Tsar's government, Interior was the largest and most widely tasked, being responsible for public order in all its aspects. Its Minister was consequently the most vulnerable, and one succeeded another almost as often as the Russian seasons, and with similar abruptness.³¹

Meanwhile, as we already know, Prince Pyotr Dmitrievich's father died and he became head of his branch of the family. A document in P. D.'s archive, drawn up on 31 July 1898, makes the following provisions from his father's estate, and affords some idea of who was closest to him outside his immediate family. To his sister Nina Dmitrievna Den [Dehn] was assigned 30,000 roubles. This woman, who is referred to in the Mirsky family papers as 'Aunt Nina', was born in Tiflis in 1853; in emigration, she lived in Rome. Her husband Vladimir was an official in the department of state for Finnish affairs. He would seem to have been a close relative of 'Lili' Dehn, one of the Empress's closest friends.³² The same amount went to Dmitry Ivanovich's niece Princess Olimpiada Aleksandrovna Baryatinskaya; and 40,000 roubles to 'my father's wards Nadezhda, Pavel and Sergey Mirsky together with their mother, the widow Aleksandra Semyonovna Kasnenskaya'.³³ These were very substantial amounts of money. Some idea of what they represented may be gained from the fact that Svyatopolk-Mirsky's annual salary as Minister of the Interior in 1905 was 18,000 roubles; Maurice Baring once estimated that to maintain a middle-class lifestyle in late imperial Russia cost about 1,000 roubles per annum. But the bulk of the wealth, it would seem, was in land and property rather than money; the family holdings in the Kharkov district amounted to 900 dessyatins (about 2,400 acres) and in the Oryol province, 500 dessyatins (about 1,350 acres).³⁴ In terms of combined inherited and earned wealth, and of hereditary and service-derived social prominence, the family may not have been plutocrats and of the blood royal, but they were comfortably off and highly respectable.

The political views of Prince P. D. Svyatopolk-Mirsky were widely known

to be on the ‘liberal’ side, to use the literal equivalent of the Russian adjective that was current among the ruling classes to designate someone who thought that perhaps a few important things needed to be reformed. His standpoint was demonstrated when on 17 September 1902 he accepted appointment as Governor-General of the Vilna, Kovno, and Grodno provinces, an area then officially known as the North-Western Territory; it corresponds to present-day Lithuania and the western and northern parts of Belarus. This was a backward step in Svyatopolk-Mirsky’s career, and he took it rather than continue in the Ministry of the Interior in the capital under the new Minister, the reactionary V. K. Plehve. The situation in Lithuania at this time was explosive: revolutionary and nationalist movements were combining to foment disobedience against Russian rule. Svyatopolk-Mirsky’s governorship was civilized and humane, and he gained a popular reputation as a fair administrator in an extremely difficult situation. He certainly had a sympathetic attitude towards the Jews, a rare quality in Russians of his background, and as far as he dared, he blamed Russian administrative measures for the difficulties faced by the Jews during his period of office.³⁵

Among Svyatopolk-Mirsky’s papers is a passport issued in Vilna on 20 January 1904 which includes his wife and children; it states that he left Russia on 22 January 1904 and returned on 11 March 1904, but it does not state where the family was in the meantime. Apparently, he was granted leave on finishing his term in Vilna. He was promoted adjutant-general on 30 July 1904, and a month later he was appointed Minister of the Interior.

MIRSKY’S MOTHER

Mirsky’s sonnet about his ancestors concentrates, characteristically, on descent in the male line. And when he said that in Russia ‘the man with understanding will never work, and all the work will be done by those who have none’ Mirsky undoubtedly meant ‘males’, but by default; there is no evidence that it ever crossed his mind to include women among those who ‘work’ in any public capacity. It goes without saying that males controlled the world of public power and authority.³⁶ Patriarchy is the most substantial respect in which Russian society has remained the same since 1917 as it was before, despite a commitment to abolish it on the part of the triumphant revolutionaries, who included a greater proportion of women in their leading ranks than there was in any other calling.³⁷ Mirsky never knew personally anyone remotely resembling what fifty years after his death would come to be understood as a professional woman, unless he chanced to come across one of the small but influential number of women doctors in Russia, many of them foreign-educated.³⁸ Despite their growing prominence in life, he probably only ever saw a female teacher on the stage—Irina in Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters*.³⁹ The actress who

played her belonged to the most visible group of professional women of Mirsky's time.⁴⁰ Instead of teachers in state schools, Mirsky knew personally another type of female pedagogue: foreign middle-class governesses. He might well have set eyes on some of the 7,000 or so professional women of a different kind who walked the streets of St Petersburg in his youth;⁴¹ as far as is known, he never engaged the services of one.

Women—except for the revolutionaries—hardly ever actively participated in activities that involved potentially fatal physical violence; and they were not usually privy to nor openly influential in what the men considered to be the most serious dimensions of their political and intellectual existence.⁴² Though his writings on Russian literature by no means neglect women writers—if anything, he seeks them out wherever they can be found—in speaking of one of the greatest of them, Zinaida Gippius (1867–1945), Mirsky innocently betrays his fundamental attitude: ‘The most salient feature in all her writings is intellectual power and wit, things rare in a woman. In fact there is very little that is feminine in Mme Hippius, except a tendency to be over-subtle and a certain wilfulness—the capriciousness of a brilliant and spoilt coquette.’⁴³

Though it by no means went unquestioned, the gendered demarcation of social functions was the norm during Mirsky's time at all levels of society. To speculate about which side benefited or suffered more from this demarcation is futile, of course, but it is the principal factor among several that caused Russian women to live longer lives than their men, and still does. On the whole, the women settled for control of the private sphere; and they survived to bear witness to the lives of their men. Politicians and soldiers aside, if a Russian man's life was lived without a real or fictional constant wife or a devoted alternative to one, and after it ended there was no widow or fictionalized muse to hoard the testimony and shape the legacy, the man concerned would not be well remembered. Many of the women concerned in fact defined themselves in terms of their spouse, as did Mirsky's mother, rather than recording their lives on their own account. The legends about Russian men tend to be articulated through a Lara or a Margarita, or commemorated by a Nadezhda Yakovlevna.⁴⁴ D. S. Mirsky never fantasized a Lara, nor fictionalized a Margarita, nor cohabited with a Nadezhda Yakovlevna.

The dominant presence during Mirsky's childhood, though, was certainly his mother. At some time in the mid-1880s, Prince P. D. Svyatopolk-Mirsky married Countess Ekaterina Alekseevna Bobrinskaya (1864–1926), who came from another of Russia's most eminent aristocratic families, though not one of ancient lineage: the founder of it was Aleksey Grigorievich Bobrinsky (1762–1813), the illegitimate son of Catherine the Great and Grigory Orlov. The Tula branch of the Bobrinskys, from which Ekaterina Alekseevna came, had made a fortune in sugar manufacturing, and this was the main source of the combined Svyatopolk-Mirsky wealth. Ekaterina Alekseevna was born in Moscow, and her mother was a Pushkin.

High politics ran in the mother's family. Her father, Count Aleksey Pavlovich (1826-94), was a friend and neighbour of Tolstoy. The most prominent Bobrinsky in the next generation was his son Count Vladimir Alekseevich (1868-1927, the 'Volodya Bobrinsky' of Mirsky's childhood letters). He had been a Guards officer, but then he went as an undergraduate to the University of Edinburgh. Bernard Pares, who knew him as a Tula delegate to the 2nd Duma and brought him back to Britain on an official visit in 1909, said that this Bobrinsky 'talked public-school English without a flaw, and generally, even in the lobby of the Duma, he had a pipe in his mouth'.⁴⁵ Pares regarded him as 'quixotic and chivalrous'; he was happily married to a peasant woman, and he had at one time considered entering the Church.

Of particular interest for what it implies about Mirsky's own family background is the following passage, written in connection with the centenary of Tolstoy's birth in 1928 at a time when a passing interest in Freudianism made itself felt in his writings shortly before being ousted by his Marxism.

In Tolstoy's actual attitude to his wife there was, as in all his experiences [*sic*] an inherent contradiction. Tolstoy's attitude was, to begin with, essentially patriarchal. . . . In Russia by the second half of the nineteenth century it was almost obsolete among the upper classes. It was (and is) prevalent among the peasants. . . . Socially, Tolstoy's attitude to his wife was that of a peasant. Psychologically and sexually, the patriarchal view corresponds to an attitude to the wife as a possession, but a possession that is in very truth part of the owner, 'the same flesh', a limb rather than a chattel. Tolstoy was too sophisticated, too educated emotionally, to give a naïve expression to this view. Like everything in him it was big with a contradiction. Hence, moments when he believed in and *lived* the complete identity and union of flesh and mind with his wife alternated with others where he *saw* her living an independent life of her own, escaping his hold, being a person with her own will, not his limb but a detached human being with head and soul complete.⁴⁶

In this passage Mirsky is leading up to a discussion of the diary of Countess Tolstoy, recently published in English, with its revelations about her husband's mental cruelty, which led to some shocked discussion among English reviewers. One wonders if Mirsky ever read the diary his own mother kept for several months during 1904-5 when her husband was at the peak of his career.⁴⁷ The diary gives a powerful impression of 'division of work between the sexes' in this social circle where the son apparently held patriarchy to be a bygone, and has far-reaching implications about the sense in which the author actually was or ever could have been 'a detached human being with head and soul complete'.

The diary shows Ekaterina Alekseevna to have been a person of considerable political acumen. Her husband seems to have confided in her completely. He would evidently come back home from his working day (the Tsar sometimes summoned him at awkward times), tell her what had happened, and at

some time later she would set down her record, often including in it what purport to be verbatim exchanges between her husband and the Tsar. On 22 November 1904 she states: 'I'm writing all this down in bits, because P. has told it me at different times when we've been talking, and it's coming out disjointed, but P. doesn't know I'm making notes, and I don't want him to know, I'll tell him later.'⁴⁸

During the Russo-Japanese war, Mirsky's mother did volunteer work from time to time at a Red Cross depot in Petersburg, sometimes taking in clothing and footwear for the troops. Her charity work was not entirely an example of the behaviour automatically expected of women of her social circle; she was manifestly religious. In her diary she sometimes gives mild expression to her faith, which was obviously a consolation to her. But much more often she says how much she wants to get away from the stresses of public life and retreat to the country. As early as 14 November 1904 she writes: 'All this time there's been too much worry. I'm beginning to realize that my thoughts are becoming confused, I've lost sight of what matters, I feel I must get close to nature, for nature always brings one towards truth.'⁴⁹

THE FAMILY

When she referred to 'nature', Ekaterina Alekseevna was thinking first and foremost of the Svyatopolk-Mirsky country estate in Ukraine, about 4 miles from the small manufacturing town of Lyubotin, which is about 15 miles away from Kharkov on the railway line that runs westwards towards Poltava. The family's postal address on the letters of Mirsky's childhood is usually given as 'Lyubotin Station, Southern Railway, Giyovka village'. This is where Mirsky was born.

Kharkov was and remains the metropolis of the heavily Russianized eastern part of Ukraine. With the coming of the railway age to Russia in the mid- to late nineteenth century it assumed great importance as the crossing-point of the principal north-south and east-west main lines, and it became a major manufacturing centre, specializing in transport vehicles and agricultural machinery. It was inhabited by a volatile mixture of Russians, Ukrainians, and Jews.⁵⁰ The city possessed a university of international standing, especially in philology. The Kharkov area was fought over heavily in the Russian Civil War, and even more destructively during the Second World War, but the rebuilt Svyatopolk-Mirsky house survives with its pond (though its church is in ruins), and is used as a boarding-school.

The fact that his birthplace was in Ukraine did not mean, of course, that Mirsky was Ukrainian by language and culture, any more than being born into the aristocracy in Scotland, say, means that the person concerned is identifiably Scots by language and culture.⁵¹ What Mirsky thought of the place can

be gauged from a sly quotation from Chekhov's *A Dreary Story* (1889) that he once used as an illustration of 'the Chekhovian state of mind':

'Let us have lunch, Kátya.'

'No, thank you,' she answers coldly.

Another minute passes in silence.

'I don't like Khárkov,' I say; 'it is so grey here—such a grey town.'

'Yes, perhaps. . . . It's ugly. . . . I am here not for long, passing through. I am going on to-day.'

'Where?'

'To the Crimea . . . that is, to the Caucasus.'⁵²

The country lifestyle of the class to which the Svyatopolk–Mirskys belonged has been described many times; the accounts of foreigners are particularly revealing. Maurice Baring stayed with the Svyatopolk–Mirsky family at Giyovka in the autumn of 1907,⁵³ and recorded the following impression:

Prince Mirski lived in a long, low house, which gave one the impression of a dignified, comfortable, and slightly shabby Grand Trianon. The walls were grey, the windows went down to the ground, and opened on to a delightful view. You looked down a broad avenue of golden trees, which framed a distant hill in front of you, sloping down to a silver sheet of water. In the middle of the brown hill there was a church painted white, with a cupola and a spire on one side of it, and flanked on both sides by two tall cypresses. There were many guests in the house: relations, friends, neighbours. We met at luncheon—a large, patriarchal meal—and after luncheon, Prince Mirski used to play Vindt in the room looking down on to the view I have described.⁵⁴

Pyotr Dmitrievich and Ekaterina Alekseevna had four children. Dmitry was the second of them, born on 9 September (28 August OS) 1890.⁵⁵ The eldest child of the family was a daughter, Sofya, born at Kuskovo near Moscow, the country seat of the Sheremetevs, on 18/30 May 1887 (some sources say 30 May/11 June). Like her mother before her, in 1910 Sofya became a Lady in Waiting, but to the last Tsar's wife, the widely detested Empress Alexandra. Sonya married—apparently before she left Russia for emigration—an engineer called Nikolay Pokhitonov. The third Svyatopolk–Mirsky child was another son, Aleksey, born in April 1894. He was a pupil at the Corps de Pages in 1908–10; he was killed while serving in the White army in 1920.⁵⁶ The fourth and youngest child was another daughter, Olga, named after her mother's mother, Olga Pushkina; she was born at Ekaterinoslav on 18 February/2 March 1899. The mother and children existed as a close-knit unit until 1914, their most stable base being the country estate at Giyovka, where they spent the summers. At other times of the year they sometimes moved with their father to his various places of appointment, but they spent the winter in St Petersburg, and apparently continued to do so after the father came to the end

of his career early in 1905. Their town house was at No. 24 Sergievskaya, one of the streets near the centre of the city that runs into Liteiny prospekt on the right as it heads towards the river; after the revolution their street was renamed in honour of Tchaikovsky.

None of the four Svyatopolk-Mirsky children replicated this pattern of family life when they became adults. The reasons stemmed only partly from the abolition of their titles and the expropriation of their property and income in 1917; as far as it is possible to tell, they are to be found mainly in the individual personalities of the children. Sofya, the only one of the four who formed a long-lasting heterosexual relationship, gave birth to a daughter, but she died in infancy in January 1927. Olga was married to a person called Agishchev for about six months, at what time and under what circumstances I do not know. The sisters lived with their mother until she died in 1926, finally separating soon after that. Like many other older *émigrés*, Sonya and Olga went back to Russia from France after the Second World War, notwithstanding the fate of their elder brother; with them as with him, patriotism was a powerful factor. 'This is my motherland, after all,' said Sonya when I met her in Moscow not long before her death on 4 September 1976. Her younger sister had died there on 3 July 1968. The four children of Pyotr Dmitrievich and Ekaterina Alekseevna thus constituted the last generation of their branch of the Svyatopolk-Mirsky family.

Through all the vagaries of his adult existence, though, D. S. Mirsky did manage to keep up two very significant elements from the pattern of life he was born to. First, he was almost always based in capital cities (St Petersburg, Athens, London, Paris, Moscow—even Magadan was a capital city of a sort), and he lived near the heart of them. Also, he always went away for the summer from these cities—except the last-named!—to various resorts. But the most fundamental respect in which Mirsky lived his entire life in the manner to which he was born was that he never looked after himself in respect of what the Russians call *byt*, everyday chores.⁵⁷ The classic lifestyle of the Russian male intellectual aims to eliminate demeaning involvement in *byt* through the exploitation of dependent wives and servants, and leave him free to pursue intellectual and other forms of self-gratification, justified and rationalized through all sorts of variously pretentious moral and ethical excuses. Nabokov was as accomplished at this art as at any other. As for Mirsky, he managed to eliminate *byt* more completely than most for the entire duration of his life, remaining in many respects a baby, both physically and emotionally. He grew up with servants to see to his material needs, and during his peacetime military service he was an officer in the phenomenally cosseted Guards. In emigration he never lived with a family for which he was responsible, never bought a house but instead lived in lodgings and hotels or with relatives, and ate in restaurants. Back in Soviet Russia this pattern continued, but in more

strained circumstances. Mirsky never learned to do anything mechanical or practical. The very idea of his typing his own writings, much less doing his own laundry or sweeping the floor, is risible. Almost as risible is the idea of Mirsky gardening, say, or taking an interest in sport, or doing anything at all (apart from eating) for the sheer pleasure of it. This is to say nothing of sharing his adult life with somebody else, and perhaps bringing up children.

Mirsky's letters to Dorothy Galton, larded as they are with ritual male wheedling ('I want you to be an angel once more . . .'), show just how accustomed he was to getting women to fetch and carry for him. In May 1935 he even managed to get her to order him a pair of trousers in London and have them brought to Moscow. In his 40s he had put on weight: 'The measurements are rather dreadful: waiste [*sic*] to ankle 102 cm; round the belly 104 cm! I have tried to reduce the centimetres into inches, but suppose that will be done in London by more competent brains.'⁵⁸ When she visited Mirsky in London in 1926, Marina Tsvetaeva prevailed on him to buy three expensive shirts; he would not have taken such a step on his own, apparently. Vera Traill told me:

He used to go around wearing God knows what. He was completely uninterested—he was always very badly dressed, everything falling apart, and there was no elegance at all. I think I remember once persuading him to buy a jacket or something, but this was a complete exception, I don't know who actually bought it, maybe nobody did, maybe Dorothy [Galton] did; after all, I never lived with him, I used to see him when so to speak we lived together (not together in bed, but together in the same house, as you might say . . .)

From cradle to grave Mirsky managed to be served, as were most other males of his time and class, and as indeed were women born to the station of his mother before the Second World War. Even when he landed up in the GULag there were cooks and cleaners to service the inmates; true, their situations were envied and fought for, sometimes to the death, by the ordinary prisoners. In all likelihood Mirsky never shopped for, let alone cooked and cleaned up after, a single meal in his entire life. Asked if Mirsky could cook, Vera Traill sputtered with bemused astonishment: 'N-n-n-o, he couldn't at all. There was nothing he could make, even tea and coffee, nothing. He was a completely helpless man.'⁵⁹

This aspect of his existence gave rise to what became a well-worn taunt, probably attributable originally to an Italian journalist,⁶⁰ to the effect that Mirsky succeeded in being a parasite under three regimes: a prince under the Tsars, a professor under capitalism, and a professional writer under communism. In his defence it should be added immediately that if the first was an unearned accident of birth, the second and third were paid for by unremitting intellectual labour, and the third was no sinecure, but a perilous adventure that

eventually cost Mirsky his life. If he was indeed in some sense a parasite, he was one of the most productive there has ever been; he was always active, and he always gave back much more than he took.

HOME TUITION AND HOME COOKING

A certain amount of evidence about the family's life before 1905 survives among the papers of Prince P. D. Svyatopolk-Mirsky.⁶¹ The earliest is a very substantial batch of letters to the head of the family written between 1895 and 1912 variously from Giyovka, Moscow, Ipswich, and Yorkshire by an Englishwoman, Mrs Clara Sharp. She had been the governess of Svyatopolk-Mirsky's wife, and she continued to live with the family from time to time even after her former charge had a family of her own.⁶² Addressing the Brontë Society in Leeds on 3 March 1923, Mirsky spoke of her, without mentioning her name: '[We] had in our family an English governess who came from Bingley, which, I take it, is a place almost next to Haworth. She had, however, little local feeling for the Brontës, I am afraid. The Brontë novels were among the few English novels my sisters were not allowed to read: they were brought up on Miss Yonge.'⁶³

There are forty-eight letters to the father from the elder son; the earliest was written on 8 December 1896 from Mount Pleasant, Devon. It is replete with inverted letters, phonetic spellings, and grammatical mistakes; the boy writes in Russian, but uses English for the personal and place-names and the phrase 'Christmas pudding'. This would appear to be the earliest surviving example of Mirsky's writing:

Deer Papa,

Mummy was in Teignmouth and Torquay. Weve not been for a walk for two days now. Papa [*sic*; Mirsky is actually addressing his father] gave me some bricks with the English alphabit on. We can go to Torquay too if I dont cry for a whole month. Mummy went to Teddington and brote me a [illegible word] boat. Ellen gave Sonya some mother-of-pearl beads. In Dalish is a mountain called Backlake Hill. We just went to Dawlish and then Exeter on the way back. We stirred the Christmas pudding. Mrs Sharp and Jack were here. Alyosha and Sonya kiss your hand Miss Trenb sends you greeting. Goodbye I kiss you Dim.

8 December 1896⁶⁴

The contraction of his Christian name with which Mirsky signs this letter is pronounced in Russian with the equivalent of a long 'i', something like 'Deem'; this was the form of address his intimates used throughout his life.

By far the most substantial set of letters to survive in the archive was written by the elder of the Brontë-deprived girls, Sonya (to use the familiar form of her name). There are more than 350 of them; the earliest was written on 29 September 1896. For obvious reasons, both Sonya and Dim write when the

father is not with the family, but away at his bureaucratic duties. The regular reports on the family by the two eldest children end in the summer of 1905; the father was now retired, and the family was together, except when the elder son was away at school.

The evidence of the letters implies that from late September 1896 to early March 1897 the mother and children were in England, at Mount Pleasant, near Exeter in Devon. In May and June 1897, May and June 1898, and July 1901, they were at a country estate called Pokrovskoe. From the mother's diary it is clear that on the way back to Petersburg from Giyovka they would stay in or near Moscow with their relations the Sheremetevs; they were there in February 1898 (when Dim reports seeing *Prince Igor* at the Bolshoi), and again in January and November 1900, and also in December 1902. On a few occasions, the family was based where the father was serving as governor, and apparently he was away in St Petersburg: Sonya and Dim write from Penza in January and March 1896 and January 1898, from Ekaterinoslav in February 1900, and Vilna in December 1903. All the other letters are from Giyovka: the family (minus the father, who would evidently join them later) would go there in May and stay until late September. We may assume that for the rest of the year they were in St Petersburg.

On 7 June 1901 Dmitry reported to his father from Pokrovskoe. He refers to a visit to the estate at Mikhailovskoe, where the Russian national poet had written some of his greatest work in 1824–6 and close to which he was buried:⁶⁵

Dear Father, We had a very jolly time at Mikhailovskoe. There's a botanical garden and museum there. We visited the Saburovs at Voronovo and Pleskovo, where Uncle Pyotr⁶⁶ lives but he wasn't there. Uncle Dmitry and Auntie Ira came with their family the day before we left. At Mikhailovskoe when Grandad Sergey Dmitrievich comes they run up the flag. On the way to Pokrovskoe at Golitsyno we met the Golitsyns. Uncle Volodya has bought a white house and is going to move it to Boturovo.⁶⁷ Auntie Maya Romanovna, Varya and Volodya arrived the day after us. . . . The Pushkins have a troika, a pony, and a donkey, and the children have a hammock and a tent. . . .⁶⁸

The Golitsyns made a reciprocal visit to Giyovka in October 1900, and in September 1904 Dim made a trip to Sarov and Nizhny Novgorod with them. This would have been a pilgrimage to the shrine of St Serafim (1760–1833) in Tambov province. He had been canonized only the year before, with enormous pomp, after intense lobbying by the Empress. The shrine was visited by thousands of Russian military men before they left to do battle in the Russo-Japanese war. The war was eight months old when the Golitsyns and Svyatopolk-Mirskys made their journey there.⁶⁹

From late in 1896 (to judge from the letters; possibly in fact earlier) a permanent presence is Miss Trend, the English governess.⁷⁰ Soon after that a French governess appears whose surname was Baumann, but who is usually referred to simply as 'Madame'; she teaches her native language and also piano.

Miss Trend was a piano player too. On 6 October 1896 Sonya reported to her father that at Mount Pleasant 'We study French in the evenings after tea, and after the lesson Mama speaks French with us'. From September 1900 a tutor appears called Ernst Sigizmundovich; his duties comprised teaching Dmitry Latin, Greek, fencing, and riding, the latter including hunting. From 1903 another teacher appears in the letters, one Feliks Moiseevich, who coaches Dim in German; in August 1904 he was reading *Faust* to his pupil. Occasionally, the servants are referred to: at least two, Katya and Dunyasha, were with the family in England, and Dunyasha even learned to speak some English. In June 1902 at Giyovka one of the carpenters was beaten up, and in July there was trouble with a drunken cook called Vasily.

Sonya pays special attention to the progress of the eldest son. She reports on his childhood infirmities: in January 1897 at Mount Pleasant he had a pain in the stomach; in June 1897 at Pokrovskoe he had a bad ear and throat.⁷¹ On 16 February at Teignmouth Uncle Alyosha bought Dim a shotgun and also presented him with 'a real bow and arrows'; later that month Dim was taken to Exeter to buy boots. On 2 March at Mount Pleasant 'Dim went riding and Potter is going to teach him and Dim's saddle is being made into a ladies' one and [perhaps] I will go riding too . . .'. On 30 May at Pokrovskoe Dim took communion; and also bought himself some toy soldiers. In May 1900 one Vladimir Aleksandrovich Fuchs visited Giyovka and taught Dim to play chess and draughts. For the boys there were various games: skittles (*gorodki*), tennis, football, swimming, skating, and—much more serious than games—riding and shooting (for snipe from Giyovka on 28 September 1901, for wolf from there on 5 October 1901). For Dim's thirteenth birthday at Giyovka in 1903 there was a fireworks display.

On 2 February 1900 Dim tells his father from Ekaterinoslav that he and his mother are going to fast that week; but for the rest of the time, indulgence seems to have been the order of the day. Dim reports on 1 June 1900 from Giyovka that lunch that day consisted of green cabbage soup with eggs, kasha and kulebyaka, lamb, baked potatoes, and a pie. Supper was meatballs in sour cream, and curd fritters (*syrniki*). In between these blow-outs, the boys and their tutor made an expedition to Lyubotin. On Dim's 10th birthday in August 1900 at Giyovka for lunch there was green cabbage soup again, chicken, corn, and ice cream; and for supper, meatballs and baked potato again. On 17 July 1900: 'Today we're going to Lyubotin for the whole day. I've been riding 7 times now; my horse is called Moroz ['Frost'], he's a very good horse. The day before yesterday we had a picnic and I ate too much.' This interest in food foreshadows the adult Mirsky's gourmandise. Similarly, the future poet and critic relishes the baby names his younger sister Olga gives to the other members of the family, reporting them twice to his father.

The family occupied themselves, naturally, with polite literary pursuits. In May 1899 at Giyovka they were reading Pushkin aloud. It was an experience

such as this that lay behind a passing remark Mirsky made in arguing that Pushkin's tale *Tsar Saltan* is among the poet's greatest achievements:

It is just because of the absence in it of all 'human significance' that *King Saltan* is the most universally human of Pushkin's works. For it is pure form, and as accessible to all those who understand Russian as pure ornament is to all those who have eyes. The child (I speak from personal experience) is as admiringly absorbed in the process of narration and in the flow of rhyme as is the sophisticated critic in the marvellous flawlessness of the workmanship and the consistency of the 'style'.⁷²

'Pure form' it may be; but the content of Pushkin's tale is not without a certain interest. The story is not centrally about the Tsar Saltan of the title, but about his son, Prince Gvidon. The Tsar is deceived into sending the newborn prince and his mother into exile. But the Prince grows up protected by a magic swan, who grants his cherished wishes before transforming herself into a beautiful princess who becomes his bride and bears him a son. There is a blissful happy ending, with everyone reconciled, much feasting, and the Prince a hero. The story was made into a ballet by Rimsky-Korsakov, and it is from there that 'The Flight of the Bumble-Bee' comes; in the course of the story, the Prince is thrice turned into an insect, and he flies back to his father's court, stings one of the jealous deceivers, and makes good his escape. Any young prince would revel in it all, whether or not he appreciated the 'flawlessness of the workmanship'.

In June 1900 Madame read to the children Jules Verne's *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*. And in the same month there were amateur theatricals at Giyovka in honour of the father's name-day. Sonya was excited: 'We are going to play a comedy called *La Vieille Cousine, ou: Il ne faut pas juger l'arbre d'après l'écorce*', it's from the book you bought us, *Théâtre de la Jeunesse*. In this comedy will appear Madame Baumann, Olimpiada, Dim and I, and we want to invite one of the Novosiltsevs; Olimpiada is going to be the hunchback.' In July 1903 Mama read *War and Peace* to the children. In July 1904 she read them *Les Misérables*.⁷³

At the centre of attention in the family, a more serious business than anything else that went on, was the education of the elder son, an education that was obviously meant to steer him in his father's footsteps; we have noted the toy soldiers, the weapons, and the riding. Dim was tutored at home until he was going on 13. Sonya reports from Mount Pleasant in October 1896 that Dim 'has learned how to hawk and spit', but also that 'Dim has started to have classes'. The presents he received, and which he reports in his dutiful birthday letters to his father, show clearly the direction his life was supposed to take. At Giyovka on 7 May 1900 one Vasily Nikolaevich Lukomsky gave him *A Survey of Russian Wars from Peter the Great to Our Times*. For his birthday in 1900 he got *The History of Suvorov* from his mother (also some soldiers and a

notebook), *A Survey of Russia's Wars* from Olimpiada ('about the war in the Caucasus', he adds, mindful of his grandfather's and father's exploits), another notebook from Mrs Sharp, and more soldiers from Yury. A month later he reports that he is reading one of the military histories and has learned some soldiers' songs. In Moscow on 5 December 1902 his mother gave him *The History of the Caucasian War*. In 1903 he was given *Africa* and a history of the Middle Ages by his mother, and by others *The History of Assyria, Governors and Thinkers, Martyrs of Science, and Through Deserts and Wastelands*.

In his later writings, as we have seen, Mirsky occasionally allowed himself a reference to his childhood reading. In his discussion of Pushkin's predecessors in prose, he speaks of 'the first complete Russian novel in the manner of Scott, Zagoskin's *Yurii Miloskavski, or the Russians in 1612* . . . It was still a household book when I was young and was the first novel I read.'⁷⁴ In actual fact there were very few Russian households in which such a book could be found; but that Mirsky should have had put into his young hands a story about an episode of Russian military triumph over foreign foes—he also speaks of its 'crude nationalism'⁷⁵—is entirely characteristic of the education he received at home. By contrast, Dim reports his sister Sonya's innocuously decorative birthday presents for her 13th birthday in 1900: a medallion from Mummy, a paperweight from Yury, a book (no title stated) from Olimpiada, a bouquet from younger sister Olga, mint cakes (*pryaniki*) from Katya, and a box for stamps from himself.

Writing from Giyovka on 8 October 1900, the son describes his routine:

Dear Father, These are the lessons we're having every day now: at 8.30 I have music, from 9 to 10 Latin, and then half an hour of gymnastics, from 11.30 to 12.30 either Russian language or arithmetic, from 12.30 to 4 there are no lessons, then from 4 to 5 there is calligraphy, then German until 6.

Even some of the family games had a serious purpose: Dim writes on 13 August 1903 from Giyovka: 'Lately we've been playing football, tennis, and a new game where you have to write down in 5 minutes the names of as many great persons as you can beginning with the same letter.'

On 28 August 1903 Dim writes: 'On the 26th Feliks Moiseevich, Alyosha and I rode to the place where the Imperial train crashed. We rode 30 versts there and back along the railway.' After that they played football by moonlight. This train crash had happened fifteen years earlier, on the morning of 17 October 1888 at Borki, just along the line from Kharkov. Tsar Alexander III and his son Nicholas, the future Tsar, who were on the train, escaped with their lives, but twenty people were killed and sixteen injured. Alexander was apparently only bruised; but by the beginning of 1894 this injury had transmogrified into the kidney disease that killed him on 20 October that year, just short of his 50th birthday.

On 5 July 1904, when he got back from riding, Dim expressed great sorrow at the news that Chekhov had died. He was later to treat Chekhov with considerably less courtesy, in an attempt to disabuse the gullible English of their inflated idea of this writer's status. Twelve days later Sonya writes: 'All of us yesterday were terribly shocked by the murder of Plehve.' But she immediately continues with her usual prosaic information: 'Yesterday the weather was good . . .' Dim writes on 18 July with a similar switch from high politics to child's play:

It rained all night yesterday. Who will be appointed to replace Plehve, do you think? Mummy wants it to be Prince Obolensky (not the Finland one). Here they've found a wild goat, still quite young. Emma has simply fallen in love with it, keeps running up to it and calling it a little angel. Au revoir, Your son Dmitry Svyatopolk-Mirsky.

On 31 July there is good news; Sonya exults: 'An heir apparent at last!' This long-awaited and much prayed-for baby boy, of course, was the doomed haemophiliac Tsarevich Aleksey.

'SI L'EMPEREUR VOUS DEMANDE QUELQUE CHOSE . . .'

The murder of Plehve in July 1904, which shocked 16-year-old Sonya, was a political act by a bomb-throwing revolutionary, and the Tsar faced a dilemma in appointing a successor. There was a right-wing choice in B. V. Sturmer. But the Tsar chose P. D. Svyatopolk-Mirsky, apparently—in this matter as in many others—in deference to the urgings of his mother, the Dowager Empress Mariya Fyodorovna (1847–1928), widow of Alexander III. Ekaterina Alekseevna Svyatopolk-Mirskaya had been a lady-in-waiting to the Dowager Empress, and retained her confidence. Ekaterina Alekseevna summed up the circumstances in the opening entry of the invaluable diary she kept in 1904–5. She sensed that her husband was going to be involved in something of historic significance, and that in fact he was about to be handed a poisoned chalice. Her very first entry gives a very good idea of this remarkable woman's mentality. Her contemptuous attitude towards Nicholas II, and towards the inner circles of St Petersburg and all they stood for, is palpable here and continues throughout her diary; elsewhere she calls the whole epicentre of power in late Imperial Russia 'a moral morass'. Her writing is as crisp as her elder son's was ever to become. She refers to her husband by his pet name 'Pepka', or simply as 'P'. On 10 August 1904 she writes:

Two days ago I had a letter from Pepka in which he says that the sovereign, when P. was presented to him on the occasion of his promotion to adjutant general, told him he needed to see P. on business . . . On that day when he was presented to Mariya Fedorovna she said: '*Si l'Empereur vous demande quelque chose, je vous supplie de ne pas refuser*'⁷⁶ and also added a good deal that was very flattering to P. Evidently the issue is

the Ministry of the Interior. P., to judge from his letter, is very embarrassed, and says that after two ministers have been murdered it is hard to refuse, but all his views are diametrically opposed to the existing state of affairs. He told Mariya Fyodorovna that if the sovereign were to say something to him, he would have to voice his view of things. I hope that happens. I think the Tsar wouldn't like it. But if this is what we are fated for, we will trust in God. I am beginning this diary so that if this unfortunate thing comes to pass and P. is appointed minister, then the truth will be recorded. In the present state of Russia, with a sovereign like the one we have, it seems to me that no minister can do anything; and besides, all that Petersburg squabbling can ruin the reputation of a saint, let alone an ordinary mortal. P. never thinks about what people will say of him, and he's too simple-hearted to battle against intrigue, and so if only for the sake of our descendants I want to record things accurately.

The distinguishing feature of P. is his benevolence, both in private life and in his public activity, and also his good nature and simple-heartedness. He has a highly developed sense of duty and legality, and this is why he is so concerned about the current direction the government is taking, which exhibits neither legality nor benevolence, but only malicious arbitrariness.⁷⁷ At the same time, traditional devotion to the sovereign is too deeply rooted in him for it to be easy for him to go directly against the sovereign's wishes.⁷⁸

As this passage suggests, the diary is indeed something of a whitewash, the story of a sensitive and decent man with an impossible job to do who is frustrated at every turn by fools and knaves motivated only by vanity and ambition.⁷⁹ Anyway, studiously patient Svyatopolk-Mirsky senior came down from Petersburg to his country estate, Giyovka, on 17 August, and five days later received the expected telegram from the Tsar. He was appointed Minister of the Interior on 11/24 August 1904, with the rank of general, second from the top of the Table, the highest ever achieved by all but the most extraordinary individual men.

It was the most unpropitious of times, if not yet the worst. The new minister was faced with mounting social unrest at the same time as Russia was engaged in the war that Japan had initiated without a declaration in January 1904. On taking office, Svyatopolk-Mirsky stated that he intended to cooperate with dissident elements in society rather than repressing them. His attitude was summarized by his wife:

If liberal reforms are not made and if the entirely natural wishes of everybody are not satisfied, then there will be changes, but in the shape of revolution. As I understand it, the wish of the overwhelming majority of well-intentioned people is the following: without affecting the autocracy, to institute in Russia the rule of law, broad religious toleration, and participation in the work of lawmaking.⁸⁰

Svyatopolk-Mirsky's brand of earnest, loyal liberalism may have earned him a good press at the time in Russia; but it was not viable as a political doctrine even before the revolutionary events of 1905. Most participants and commentators agree that the Tsarist order was already too far gone to be ameliorated, and the proportion of 'well-intentioned' people in the population prepared to

act on their fundamental sense of loyalty turned out to be pitifully small when moments of extreme crisis came. Bernard Pares commented: 'The appointment of Prince Mirsky after the murder of Plehve had lent colour to the popular idea that bombs were the only argument to which the Government would listen.'⁸¹ Moderation was shoved aside with what seems like contemptuous ease in the ensuing years by extremism of various kinds. Again, it must be said that Minister Svyatopolk-Mirsky's elder son never seems to have written or done anything to suggest that he inherited or absorbed from his father any attachment either to moderation or to participatory democracy, much less toleration in matters of religion. Like his mother, he had no respect for the vacillating and 'well-intentioned' Nicholas II; and he came to have a lot of respect for the single-minded, ruthless, and utterly unscrupulous Lenin.

In office, Svyatopolk-Mirsky senior tried his best according to his lights. He sacked Plehve's closest associates from the Ministry, and called for a spirit of mutual trust in the ways his officials were to deal with the population. He ordered the release of many prominent dissidents from imprisonment and internal exile; one of them was Maksim Gorky, who was a member of a delegation that came to see Svyatopolk-Mirsky on 9 January 1905 to try and persuade him to listen to the representatives of the workers.⁸² Gorky may well have recalled this act many years later when he facilitated the return of the Minister's son to Russia from emigration. The result of such acts of mercy was a remarkable expression of public support.

Under Svyatopolk-Mirsky's aegis, various steps were taken towards the introduction of some sort of national assembly, and also towards the organization of professional unions. He permitted the National *Zemstvo* Congress⁸³ to meet in St Petersburg in November 1904, with an agenda calling for the discussion of previously smothered issues such as freedom of speech and of the press. The Congress made an eleven-point resolution, which Svyatopolk-Mirsky persuaded the Tsar at least to receive. And the Minister made his own proposals parallel to those contained in the eleven points. The Tsar set up a select committee to examine them. Svyatopolk-Mirsky's most important proposal was that the elected *zemstvo* members be included in the Council of State. This was rejected on the advice of Count Witte. Svyatopolk-Mirsky offered to resign in favour of Witte, but the Tsar declined. For the remainder of the minister's tenure the Tsar played a cat-and-mouse game with his proffered resignation that infuriated the Minister's wife.

On 18 November 1904, after her husband comes home and reports yet another squabble in the presence of the Tsar, Ekaterina Alekseevna writes:

I don't care two hoots about all this. On the whole I'm convinced now that P. possesses an amazing character. I would have long since strangled one of them, but even though they pester him all day long and he gets terribly tired, he is always kind and welcoming with everybody and almost always cheerful—just once in a while despair comes over him; and after all he's bored stiff with everything.⁸⁴

This last remark is worth noting. The Minister's elder son took after his mother rather than his father and had an extremely low threshold of boredom, and he certainly did not manage to be 'kind and welcoming' all the time; rather, he was impatient and could be abrasively rude. He was never circumspect. Igor Vinogradoff, the son of Sir Paul, knew several members of Mirsky's mother's family, and their gossip suggested that 'his unbalanced side probably came from his Bobrinsky mother'.⁸⁵ He added: 'Mirsky's Bobrinsky mother was of the Tula branch—a sister of the well-known Duma member—much more excitable people, under the surface, than the Petersburg branch. His (Mirsky's) sister was also, I believe, capable of astounding fits of rage.'⁸⁶

Svyatopolk-Mirsky's patience was sorely tried. Only the least controversial proposals he made were adopted by the Tsar, in an *ukaz* published on 12/25 December 1904, but they were vitiated by another *ukaz* two days later that called on officials not to step outside the narrow limits of their duties.

The military disasters in the Far East gave an additional edge to the unrest in the capital. There were further street demonstrations as the year 1905 began, and they were more violent, culminating in the 'well-intentioned' demonstration that ended up as Bloody Sunday, 9/22 January 1905, when troops fired on the demonstrators and about 150 people were killed. Svyatopolk-Mirsky was at last allowed to step down a week later; his final act of service was to act as the Tsar's scapegoat for these events. His son was later to translate the Marxist historian Pokrovsky's view of what happened, a view endorsed by Lenin. Here, 'Bloody Sunday' is presented as a premeditated provocation by the government. Discussing these events, Pokrovsky cites the British newspaper correspondent Dr Dillon, and the Minister's son adds a parenthesis for the English reader: 'The governor of the city, Fullon, knew about it, so did the Assistant Minister of the Interior, the Minister, Svyatopolk-Mirsky, Witte, Muraviev (The Minister of Justice.—*Tr.*)—in a word several days before the massacre everyone was informed of what was being prepared.'⁸⁷

On 18/31 January 1905 Svyatopolk-Mirsky was granted eleven months' leave with retention of salary; but he was not made a member of the State Council, as would normally have been the case. The autocracy staggered on into the 'Duma period', soon afterwards technically no longer an absolute monarchy but one which was slightly limited, its 'most august' head apparently believing to the end that if only there were not such a shortage of sound men for the key posts, he could govern the country firmly and effectively.

Pyotr Dmitrievich Svyatopolk-Mirsky took no further part in public life after he resigned his Ministry, and he died in St Petersburg after close on ten years of retirement, on 16 May 1914, three years short of 60. Such a decade of tranquillity never came the way of his eldest son; when he died, D. S. Mirsky was about the same age as his father when P. D.'s public career ended. On the father's death, his estate passed to his four children, with the mother

retaining possession for the remainder of her lifetime. The Russian revolution thus cost Mirsky, as it did Vladimir Nabokov, personal wealth and possessions enough to last a comfortable lifetime.

‘WHERE SHALL I GO TO SCHOOL NOW?’

The time eventually came for the eldest son to be put to formal schooling. On 14 May 1903 the V St Petersburg *gimnazija* certified that after being educated at home, the boy had taken the third-form examination and achieved the following marks (all out of 5, as consistent a feature of pre- and post-revolutionary Russia as patriarchy): Scripture 5, Russian 4, Latin 5, Mathematics 3, History 5, Geography 5, Natural History 5, and French 5. The order in which the subjects are named is not accidental; it reflects the priorities according to the official view of the school curriculum. The almost complete absence of natural science from Mirsky’s subjects is indicative, as is his excellent performance in geography; he knew such things as the capital of the Sandwich Islands, as we shall soon see, and he remained fascinated by maps and terrain for the rest of his life.

On 29 August 1904, after an evening of music-making at home, Dim tells his father, ‘Your biography is in all the papers and they all say that you were born in 1859. Tomorrow Mama is arriving. . . . Where shall I go to school now? Tomorrow I’ll probably start studying seriously with Feliks Moiseevich . . .’. His mother notes in her diary on 20 January 1905, after her husband had resigned his ministry but before it was clear whether or not he would remain in the capital: ‘I’m looking forward to spring in Giyovka, it’s very nice, I’d like P. to go into retirement and for us to be free citizens; the only problem is Dim—where should we place him?’⁸⁸

The family got back to Giyovka on 7 February 1905 and started seeing their neighbours. The mother notes one particular encounter that confronted the youthful Mirsky with the antagonism that existed in Russia between the military and the intelligentsia:

A. L. Velichko came round, he’s the Marshal of the Gentry for Lebeda now, a most loyal and conservative man, a retired Hussar who recognizes only military service because that’s the only area where discipline still exists. I think he shocked Dim because he said that the universities only spend their time on foolishness.⁸⁹

This ‘lack of discipline’ turned into rioting and then revolution in the ensuing months. On 8 February 1905 Dim went to Kharkov with his mother and they saw some groups of striking workers. This is one of the last entries before a long gap in her diary. On 9 October she notes:

I haven’t written anything for nearly 8 months. So many things have happened that it’s hard to keep track of them. The battle of Tsushima and the loss of the fleet, the manifesto of 6 August, peace, the autonomy of the universities—they’re the most out-

standing facts. But there are so many others, the death of Kolya Den in particular;⁹⁰ in social life all the *zemstvo* congresses, the disturbances, the manifesto on religious toleration, too much to count it all. In short, Russia last February is almost a different country from Russia now. And there's no ray of light to be seen. What a calamity for Russia was the death of S. N. Trubetskoy!⁹¹

Prince Sergey Nikolaevich Trubetskoy (1862–1905), the historian of ancient philosophy, was elected Rector of Moscow University after winning his long fight for university autonomy, but died just after his appointment. As the most widely respected intellectual in Russia, he had written a letter to P. D. Svyatopolk-Mirsky on 28 November 1904 pleading for reform. He was the father of D. S. Mirsky's friend, the great linguist Prince N. S. Trubetskoy, the future leader of the Eurasian movement. Sergey Trubetskoy was an exception to Mirsky's maxim asserting that in Russia only those do who can't think. Mirsky's mother commented on 8 February 1905:

We have a lot of well-intentioned people, but few who are strong in spirit and capable of sensible activity. There is nothing to give joy and much that is sad. The *Potemkin*, the *Baku*—it's been hard to live through all that in the course of one year. What will happen next? The railways have gone on strike now . . .⁹²

It is clear from the following few entries that the elder son was not in Giyovka when the disturbances reached their climax in October 1905; he had in fact started school in Moscow. His mother managed to exchange several telegrams with him as communications broke down in October and November. On several occasions, the Svyatopolk-Mirsky estate at Giyovka was threatened by marauding bands; they were diverted by simple bribery and on one occasion by the gift of a barrel of vodka. Eventually, the death toll at the barricades in Kharkov reached 200. On 18 October Ekaterina Alekseevna records:

We've lived to see a constitution, may God only grant that Russia calms down. I was still drinking my tea this morning when Pepka came in with a telegram in his hand and a serious look on his face. I was alarmed, but then I noticed that his face was relaxed, and those of Sonya and Alyosha were joyful. It turns out . . . that a manifesto has come out granting freedom of the person, speech, assembly etc.—in short, what we've been trying to achieve for so long and so hard, and at first I was astonished rather than glad. At first when I get something I've wanted for a long time, I always wonder whether it's for the better.

May God grant that we can make good use of our freedom! At last Russia is a free country. But I'm afraid that the revolutionaries will not stop at this. Of course, the vast mass of the intelligentsia will be satisfied, but now the revolutionaries can seduce the ordinary people with their socialist propaganda, and they'll see that this freedom won't make much immediate difference to them, and the revolutionaries will tell them they've been hoodwinked, and so on.

Ekaterina Alekseevna was not fantasizing here, for it was the fear that the people would settle for gradualism that had motivated the revolutionaries of the People's Will to assassinate the 'Tsar-Liberator' Alexander II in 1881 when

it was known that he was on the point of granting a constitution. The ex-Minister's wife continues:

And the only thing that can work against this is a sense of property. If the perverted principle of communal landholding isn't done away with, Russia will never be at peace. In order to settle the peasants on their own land one could even resort to such a measure as infringing property rights—the mandatory purchase of a certain part of the country squires' land, once and for all.⁹³

Here, Ekaterina Alekseevna adumbrates what was to be the central plank in the reforming policy of Stolypin in the coming years, aimed to reform the most vexing problem besetting the Russian countryside. Ekaterina Alekseevna's diary breaks off on 21 October 1905 with the following exasperated comment: 'There's another lull, but no hope of getting away. The leaders [of the railwaymen] are just revolutionaries—what more do they want? This means they want anarchy.'⁹⁴ What 'they' wanted was to be expressed to devastating effect a dozen years later.

Just as his country emerged from the abortive revolution of 1905 that terminated his father's career, the adolescent prince was set to follow in his footsteps and be trained for public service. Imperial Russia was entering the final phase of its existence.