

# INTRODUCTION

## *Getting through Hard Times*

VASILY SLEPTSOV AND HIS RADICAL HAMLET

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*William C. Brumfield*

VASILY SLEPTSOV IS A RARE PHENOMENON IN RUSSIAN literature, a social activist who was able to translate the issues that concerned him into works of literary value. His writings, both fictional as well as nonfictional, were suffused with a sense of the social and political realities particular to the 1860s, that thoroughly politicized decade in Russia. In his person as well as in his works, Sleptsov epitomized the engaged intellectual atmosphere of the “era of great reforms” that followed the abolition of serfdom in 1861.

In his novel *Hard Times*,<sup>1</sup> Sleptsov brought a sympathy for the radical movement into a fictional setting whose characters examine their relations in a constantly evolving social and emotional milieu. The longing for a new life within the languorous setting of a country estate anticipates much in the mature work of Anton Chekhov,

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I. An extended analysis of Sleptsov’s novel is provided in William C. Brumfield, “Sleptsov Redivivus,” in *California Slavic Studies* 9 (1976), 27–70. A monographic study of Sleptsov is provided in the same author’s *Sotsial’nyi proekt v russkoi literature XIX-ogo veka* (Moscow: Izd. “Tri kvadrata,” 2009).

who is quoted as saying: “Sleptsov taught me, better than most, to understand the Russian *intelligent* [intellectual, member of the intelligentsia] and my own self as well.”<sup>2</sup>

Sleptsov’s biography is both revealing and contradictory as a portrait of his times. He was born on July 17, 1836, in Voronezh. Both of his parents had respectable nobility credentials, a fact that separated him from other socially engaged writers of the 1860s. His mother was descended from Polish and Baltic nobility, while his father was of Russian noble lineage with a number of highly placed relatives in Moscow.

In 1837 the family moved to Moscow, where it remained for the next eleven years. The father was now chronically ill and family tensions were exacerbated by his parents’ disapproval of Sleptsov’s choice of a Polish bride. Although Vasily was a precocious student, his Moscow education was interrupted in 1849 when the family relocated to an inherited estate in Saratov Province. Conditions there were so primitive that Vasily was sent to the Noblemen’s Institute in Penza, but he returned to the estate in 1851 following his father’s death.

This peripatetic, unstable existence seems to have permanently marked Sleptsov’s life. He returned to Moscow and to university life in 1853, but his medical studies were superseded by his love of the theater and ballet. In 1856 he married a ballet dancer, who died the following year. In 1858 he remarried; he and his second wife (the daughter of Tver gentry) had two children. Having settled his family at his Saratov estate in 1860, he separated from his wife and returned to Moscow.

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2. Chekhov’s comment was recorded in a conversation with the writer Maksim Gorkii, who conveyed it in a letter written in late February 1912 to D. N. Ovsyaniko-Kulykovskii. First published in *M. Gor’kii. Materialy i issledovaniia*, vol. I (Leningrad: Akademiia nauk, 1934), 284. Chekhov not only knew Sleptsov’s work but also was friends with two women who had been closely acquainted with Sleptsov: Lidiia Maklakova and Liubov Vorontsova. The former, better known under her literary pseudonym Nelidova, lived with Sleptsov for his last three years and wrote a novel, *Na maloi zemle* (unpublished), about their life together.

There Sleptsov launched his career as a writer among a group of “radicals” grouped around the salon of Countess Elizabeth Salias de Tournemir.<sup>3</sup> In 1861 her journal, *Russian Speech*, published his first significant work, “Vladimirka and the Kliazma,” an engagingly idiosyncratic travel narrative that gathered ethnolinguistic material and doubled as an exposé of corruption in the construction of the Moscow-Nizhny Novgorod Railroad. While working at the journal, Sleptsov also made the acquaintance of the writer Nikolai Leskov, who subsequently became an implacable enemy.

The success of this work drew the attention of Nikolai Nekrasov, a renowned poet, critic, and editor of the leading intellectual journal the *Contemporary*. Nekrasov commissioned another exposé from Sleptsov. His subsequent “Letters from Ostashkov” (1862), a jaundiced look at the town’s reformist pretensions, launched his most productive period. Having moved to St. Petersburg in late 1862, Sleptsov became one of the most frequent contributors to the revived *Contemporary*. Of particular note was his publication in 1863 and 1864 of a series of brilliantly crafted short stories that subsequently attracted the attention of Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Chekhov.

Sleptsov’s most publicized and controversial activity was the founding of what was subsequently known as the Znamenskaia or Sleptsov commune. In and of itself a commune was not that unusual a phenomenon in St. Petersburg or Moscow during the 1860s. Indeed, it seems in retrospect that its most remarkable feature was the fact that it received so much attention, from both the police and the public.

Sleptsov was familiar with Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s recent novel *What Is to Be Done?* (especially its description of the heroine’s

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3. Perhaps the foremost woman writer of her generation, the countess wrote under the pseudonym Evgeniia Tur. A section of her four-volume novel was translated into English by Michael Katz: *Antonina* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

model commune for seamstresses).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, he himself was much involved in efforts to provide employment for women with no means to support themselves. A communal living arrangement à la Chernyshevsky would be the logical extension of these efforts. And it is known that Sleptsov was at least superficially familiar with the theories of Fourier and was particularly interested in his practical ideas on the formation of a “phalanstery.”

Organization began in August 1863, but internal bickering and ideological dissent among the commune’s members, as well as poor financial management, led to its disbanding after only a few months.

By the end of 1864, however, Sleptsov had begun work on what was to become his magnum opus, *Hard Times*. This short novel was announced in the December issue of *Contemporary* and appeared in installments during the following year. It was to catapult Sleptsov to the height of his literary career, and it remains a monument not only to the writer but also to the decade it reflects. Few works from that era provoked such a storm of partisan reaction. In essence *Hard Times* dealt with the fundamental issue confronting prerevolutionary Russian society: What is to be done with a system facing massive, perhaps insurmountable, social problems—a course of work and reform within the system or rejection of the entire system and, eventually, revolution?

The success of Sleptsov’s work in 1865 was soon brutally interrupted. On April 4, 1866, Dmitrii Karakozov—a former student and member of an extreme faction of a radical circle—made an unsuccessful attempt on the life of Alexander II. The ensuing reaction not only crushed the remnants of the circle but also had a considerable impact on Russian intellectual life.

On April 30, 1866, Sleptsov was arrested under suspicion of radical sympathies and taken to Peter-Paul Fortress. Most of those arrested were released after a few weeks (seven in Sleptsov’s

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4. The phrase “what is to be done?” occurs frequently during this period as an echo of Chernyshevsky’s title.

case), but even such a relatively short confinement had serious effects.

Something seems to have fractured in Sleptsov's life. For a few years he continued to be active in Petersburg intellectual life—particularly in the cause of women's equality. However, he found it increasingly difficult to devote attention to his writing, and his career floundered, despite Nekrasov's best intentions. In his personal life, though, he managed to find lasting and devoted love in the companionship of his common-law wife. His health problems took an alarming turn. In 1877 the impoverished Sleptsov journeyed to the Caucasus to seek respite from the pain, but to no avail. Evidence suggests that he suffered from intestinal cancer.

Sleptsov, in seriously weakened condition, returned to his mother's estate near Serdobsk in March 1878. He died two weeks later after a long period of agony. Plans to have him buried at Petersburg's prominent Volkovo Cemetery were abandoned for lack of funds. He was interred in the Serdobsk village cemetery, its small church surrounded by the steppe.

One constant in Sleptsov's combination of literature and social activism was his engagement in the movement for women's emancipation. No other Russian writer, Chernyshevsky not excepted, portrayed the issues of feminism, the background of frustration, the restraints of convention as cogently as he did. In *Hard Times* as well as in his feuilletons, Sleptsov repeatedly championed the cause of equality for women. In this respect he has much in common with the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, whose plays, such as *A Doll's House*, resemble *Hard Times* in their portrayal of the heroine's revolt against her bourgeois, or gentry, milieu.

Yet just what sort of radical was Sleptsov? He certainly was an opponent of what he saw as ineffectual attempts to patch a leaky social and political order, and he was consistent in exposing (as far as censorship would allow) the many abuses and grave social problems confronting Russia during the 1860s. Sleptsov was not, however, a doctrinaire ideologue, nor was he an active revolutionary.

Radical activists in the 1860s had not yet formulated a concrete plan for political revolution. With the disenchantment of hopes for a transformation of Russian society following the emancipation of the serfs, few “critically thinking individuals” of that era were able to visualize the means by which meaningful social and political change would occur.

Sleptsov, like others of radical persuasion, could only work for a change in social attitudes and continued to reject the possibility of reform within the existing regime. This approach can best be characterized as “classic” nihilism, a term that, in its political and social meaning, originated from and was particularly well suited to the 1860s. Such a “nihilistic” approach served Sleptsov well in *Hard Times*, but his eventual search for a positive alternative led only to disillusionment, frustration, and literary paralysis. Like his protagonist in *Hard Times*, Sleptsov fell into the grip of the “Hamlet syndrome.”

As Sleptsov’s most significant work, the novel ensured his reputation as a critical realist while igniting a polemical response that lasted until the revolution. Few works in the history of Russian literature have been the subject of such heated debate or have had their main characters so discussed, analyzed, dissected, and reassembled in the political image of the commentator. That such a reaction should have occurred is understandable in light of then prevailing attitudes toward the function and duty of literary criticism to serve as a vehicle for social and political comment.

The novel is well suited to such attitudes, since it deals with the most volatile issue confronting educated Russian society after the Emancipation: Should Russia follow the path of liberal reform or that of radical change? In the figure of the novel’s protagonist, Riazanov, Sleptsov presents a portrait of the radical intelligentsia during one of its most turbulent and crucial states of development. Nowhere is the politicized, radical intellectual depicted with greater sympathy and yet with so little idealization; nowhere are the attitudes of the “thinking proletariat” (Dmitry Pisarev’s phrase)

displayed more cogently.<sup>5</sup> Sleptsov's nihilist is as important and as controversial as Turgenev's hero Bazarov for any attempt to recapture the spirit of the sixties. Both represent the Russian intelligentsia's groping search for "the real day."<sup>6</sup>

Since *Hard Times* is so deeply rooted in the issues and events of that decade, it would be well to review the situation at that time. The action takes place in the summer of 1863, some two years after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed by Alexander II. The success (or failure) of the Emancipation, as well as the reforms connected with it, had become the focus of intense debate. Liberals welcomed the reforms and felt that the only path to progress lay in gradual change, supervised by a strong centralized government.

On the radical side, Chernyshevsky, in particular, was quite vocal in his opposition to the terms of the serfs' liberation. As early as 1858 and 1859, during the formative stages of Emancipation policy, he had consistently argued for a reduction of redemption payments and for a redistribution of land within the framework of the peasant commune. The land reform of 1861 was, for Chernyshevsky as for Sleptsov, a deal between landowners and the state that preserved the rights and many privileges of the gentry, while leaving the peasant to fend for himself under extremely unfavorable conditions. Despite an initial euphoria with the concept of emanci-

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5. The phrase "thinking proletariat" was coined by the critic Dmitry Pisarev in his article "Novyi tip" ("the new type"), first published in the intellectual journal *Russkoe slovo* 1865, no. 10. Republished in D. I. Pisarev, *Sobranie sochinenii v 4-kh tomakh* (Moscow: GIKhL, 1956), 12–24. Pisarev's article presented an extended analysis of the characters in Chernyshevsky's novel *What Is to Be Done?*
  6. In the early 1860s the phrase "the real day" (*nastoiashchii den'*) gained currency in Russian social criticism as a covert reference to impending fundamental social change in Russia. The first published use can be dated to the radical critic Nikolai Dobrolyubov's widely read essay "When Will the Real Day Come?" ("Kogda zhe pridet nastoiashchii den'?" ), published in the intellectual journal *Russkii vestnik* in 1860. The essay was an extended commentary on Ivan Turgenev's novel *On the Eve*.

pation and its possibilities, the eventual formulation of Emancipation policy was seen as faulty, impractical, and unjust.

The ephemeral hopes of certain radicals for a general revolution, based on peasant disturbances after the Emancipation, failed to materialize. A series of mysterious fires in Petersburg and various towns along the Volga during 1862 only served to strengthen the government's policy of repression, as did the Polish rebellion of 1863. As a result of the latter, oppositional tendencies among the liberal gentry evaporated, while radicals lacking coherent organization detested liberals and feuded among themselves. It is these "hard times" that form the historical background of Sleptsov's novel.

In addition, the issue of women's emancipation—psychological, mental, and legal—occupies a prominent position in determining the relations between Sleptsov's characters.<sup>7</sup> In *Hard Times* the author applied his commitment to the "woman question" to form a thematic line that rivals the contest between the liberal estate owner (Shchetinin) and his radical acquaintance (Riazanov).

Such is the work's base—the events and issues that constitute its theme and motivate its action. Its artistic implementation is deceptively simple: there is little plot development, and, despite the possibility for a *ménage à trois*, the love interest is redirected. Instead, the work is oriented toward development of its two major themes, the exposé of liberal gradualism and the right of a woman to determine her own future. To this end it is heavily dependent on lively dialogue—witty "confrontations" among its three leading characters.

Limited to the events that produce an estrangement between Shchetinina and her husband, the plot structure is a sparse frame

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7. In literature the issue of women's emancipation had already appeared prominently in George Sand's novel *Jacques* (1833) and Alexander Herzen's *Who Is to Blame?*, first published in the journal *Otechestvennyye zapiski* in 1845–1846 and republished as a book in 1847. Both works were widely known among Russian writers and intellectuals.



for the considerable thematic load placed upon it. It is the dialogue, at once substantive and conversational, that sustains the novel. The language itself is colloquial and informal, with frequent use of particles, verbs without subjects, and numerous colloquial expressions. And then there are passages that illustrate Sleptsov's uncanny ability to convey peasant speech. Off-the-cuff remarks, humorous or sarcastic interjections, flashes of anger, an abrupt shift from one scene to the next—these devices vary the pace and propel the plot forward, while narrative intrusions are so rare that the work reads like a play. It is not surprising that Konstantin Stanislavsky, in a letter to Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, suggested that, with a few modifications, *Hard Times* would be suitable for staging.

Despite Sleptsov's sympathy with Riazanov's political views and Shchetinina's break with her past, the characters are treated with equanimity. All have their limitations. The landowner Shchetinin's emotions are often portrayed as sympathetically as those of the other characters. It is a measure of Sleptsov's success that each of his three personages was in turn designated by contemporary critics as the central, positive figure, the designation depending on the critic's political bias. By the same token, each took his or her share of critical abuse.

Yet any treatment of the literary significance of *Hard Times* must eventually lead to a discussion of Riazanov. In him there is a mingling of two seemingly contradictory images of the Russian literary hero—the superfluous man and the man of action. Riazanov, as a superfluous man, represents a revolution defeated, an activist transformed into a cynic (or realist), drained of emotion and unwilling to respond to the feelings of a woman who loves him—and to whom he is attracted. In a word, a Russian Hamlet. Riazanov as an activist, on the other hand, is something of a professional radical, a writer (probably a political essayist), and his views are conditioned by a sociopolitical, materialist view of history in which the flawed existing order must be overturned.

Lacking the programmatic answers of Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* Sleptsov leaves his protagonist suspended in uncertainty.

Nature, then, is called upon to suggest the larger forces at work. For *Hard Times* is suffused with the presence of nature's elemental force—not in the lyrical tone of Turgenev's *Fathers and Children*, with its symbolism of reconciliation and continuity—but a harsher, more elemental force. Through it a larger background is created, one that reflects the atmosphere of ennui and tension prevalent in *Hard Times*. A half century following its publication, war and revolution would destroy the gentry milieu described in the novel, the same setting that nurtured Sleptsov and to which he returned shortly before his death. Although Sleptsov could not possibly have predicted the extent of the cataclysm in *Hard Times*, he has certainly succeeded in conveying a sense of the gathering storm.