

Imagining the Russian Provinces

In 1928, Nikolai Piksánov—a well-known philologist close to the Russian Formalists—predicted that the study of provincial culture and local history would become the wave of the future. Historians, art historians, literary scholars, archivists, and economists would join forces in a series of seminars and research projects to uncover the richness of Russia’s regional past; this knowledge, in turn, would shape the formation and development of the many regions of the recently established Soviet state.¹ Ironically, Piksánov proposed this project on the eve of the final purge of the discipline of local history or *kraevedenie*. Instead, over most of the twentieth century, Moscow exercised an almost demonic centripetal pull over the Soviet Union. Not only political power and material goods but also information and scientific study gravitated inexorably to the capital; local historians were relegated to an increasingly pathetic function of minor record-keeping and pious enthusiasm for such events as Alexander Pushkin’s fleeting visit to “our region” (*nash krai*). Piksánov’s own fate was characteristic in the very absence of drama: he lived quietly until the 1970s, occupying himself with innocuous researches, while the Soviet writers’ encyclopedia commented drily, “Marxist literary studies does not deny the necessity of taking into account these local characteristics, but, proceeding from the general premises of dialectical materialism, accords this principle a secondary position.”²

Eighty years later, because of this discontinuity in the historiographical tradition, the historian’s foray into the Russian provinces has the feel of a voyage

of discovery, one in which we find ourselves reconstructing the fragments of a world that Piksánov's unrealized projects might perhaps have presented to us in a coherent picture. The pages that follow are the result of one such voyage, which began for me in 1992, when I caught the train from Moscow to Nizhnii Novgorod—an apparently simple act that would have been inconceivable just a year earlier, when Nizhnii Novgorod was still the closed city of Gorky—to begin an investigation of the universe of the Russian provinces in the nineteenth century. It was not long before my reading, in the regional library and the Nizhnii Novgorod State Regional Archive (GANO), took on a life of its own.

The Great Reforms of the 1860s transformed the Russian countryside. They did so, however, not only in the ways we are accustomed to thinking about them: a series of centrally legislated measures to emancipate the peasantry and construct a legal system and a mechanism for self-government. Rather, they created new spaces for people in provincial Russia—the areas most directly affected by the reforms—to shape the world they lived in. The peasant emancipation created a variety of new needs on the local level: everything from the crafting of the contracts between landlords and communes to the providing of essential health care and education required a mobilization of skills and energies.³ Lawyers, physicians, scientists, teachers, and journalists were all in high demand. We can argue forever (and people have) whether the peasants were “truly” liberated or not. But it is unquestionable that individuals with the knowledge and training needed for the implementation of the reforms gained a good deal of room for maneuver; it was a process that continued unchecked until it culminated in the Revolution of 1905.

The reforms, and the social change they brought about, provoked a wave of fascination, in Russian educated society, with the most minute details of local environment and local life, ranging from geological formations to ethnic and religious interactions to local history. Knowing one's environment can result in the capacity to shape it, and educated people in the provinces in the post-reform era went about the pursuit of such knowledge with relentless energy. It was with some surprise that I found myself being confidently guided by my nineteenth-century interlocutors along the presumably opaque byways of Nizhnii Novgorod province, as they showed me the most obscure corners of each district, explained to me the practices that produced felt boots and wooden spoons, proudly celebrated their city's national role in the Time of Troubles, and led me inside the Old Believer sketes deep in the forests north of the Volga.

This book has a double purpose. I would like, first, to take advantage of the extraordinary production of published documents on the nineteenth-century provinces, and Nizhnii Novgorod in particular, in order to reconstruct my own portrait of the province. Researchers in the post-reform era collected and published data about every imaginable topic: meteorology, ethnography, topography, criminality, education, social insurance, rural medicine, religion, local history; these materials are an archive unto themselves, distinguished

from a “real” archive primarily by their greater legibility.⁴ The documents are not easy reading and look, at first glance, like a collection of meaninglessly detailed information. With some patience and analysis, however, the dry pages of statistical and ethnographic studies begin to come alive, revealing a vibrant commercial world in constant motion; a focused campaign to improve local infrastructure through control over taxation; and an active scientific, musical, and literary community. The detail and clarity of the nineteenth-century materials make the process akin to a physician’s insertion of a scope into the patient’s body: a careful reading permits us to discern the outlines of the province’s inner workings.⁵ By definition, this methodology cannot lay claim to completeness. I have been guided, throughout, by a desire to understand and illuminate not what is unique to one province alone but rather what is generalizable. This is thus a portrait in a very specific sense: one that, by focusing on the particular, brings out features shared by the provinces of the Russian “metropole” to one degree or another. This book’s underlying premise is that it is as important to understand the central regions of European Russia as it is to understand the borderlands and “peripheral” regions, which have become the object of intensive study in recent years, and even that the mechanisms of governance and local participation in the Russian provinces can shed new light on variations of such mechanisms in the border regions.

My second purpose is to show that the very process of apprehension of the details of the material environment and of local life contributed, over time, to the emergence of a local consciousness that was most coherently articulated as an “idea of province.” From a passive object of the observations of travelers and scientists, the province, through the process of knowing itself, became transformed into a subject and creator of its own identity. The agents of this transformation were the provincial intelligentsia—people like Aleksandr Serafimovich Gatsiskii, head of the Nizhnii Novgorod Statistical Committee—who both collected the data and used them to promote the provincial idea. Gatsiskii was typical of a generation that came into its own in the 1860s—priests, teachers, physicians, statisticians, agronomists, lawyers who trained in the spirit of the reform era and who made a conscious choice to dedicate their professional lives to their respective provinces. This study pivots on these individuals: their picture of the province forms its point of departure, while their collective portrait should emerge, gradually, from the chapters that follow. They are the mediators between us and the world that becomes visible through their painstaking gathering of material. It is essential, of course, to avoid the double pitfall of either becoming their prisoner (blindly accepting the nineteenth-century categories and thus literally re-creating their image of the world) or becoming so absorbed in analyzing the collectors that the data themselves vanish from view.⁶ Rather, the intent here is to capture the intimate mutual interdependence between the province’s concrete reality and the manner in which its interpreters eventually conceptualized it as a “provincial idea.”⁷

Space, Region, Historiography

In a recent article, Karl Schlögel writes, “It is surprising to what degree Russian and Soviet history have thus far been studied outside the realm of space. There are but a few works in which the Russian Empire is seriously perceived in spatial terms, and which discuss distance, transport and communication, and means of transmission of cultural objects and values.”⁸ It seems almost painfully obvious to state that Russia was (and is) a very big country. It is all the more ironic, then, that much smaller countries, like France, Spain, Italy, or Germany, have developed a rich tradition of regional and local studies, revealing the diverse fabric and “lumpiness” of the national unit, whereas the discipline of Russian history has, for the most part, remained oddly indifferent to the concept of geographical space and to the spatial as well as temporal dimensions of historical events. The “biggest country”—famously, one-sixth of the world’s surface—has remained largely confined to a flattened, homogenized, centralized perspective.⁹

My approach in this book is entirely place-specific. Unlike Richard Hellie, who tries to assess material culture for seventeenth-century Muscovy as a whole, or even Fernand Braudel, whose approach has in other ways inspired this research yet who insists on a global rather than a localized perspective, I operate on the premise that the most basic of human beings’ activities play out in entirely concrete surroundings and that we must first understand specific, locally circumscribed interactions before proceeding to analysis in terms of sociological categories (class, status, civil society) or generalized historical processes (industrialization, modernization, urbanization).¹⁰ Moreover, even the study of such apparently “immobile” material as geological structures may, given a local perspective rather than a bird’s-eye view, begin to appear much more subject to change and flux than we might expect.

There then arises the question of the specific unit of analysis and of how we can define the parameters of the local. “Province,” to me, is quite an inclusive concept. In the most literal sense, “province” is simply the English translation of the administrative term *guberniia*. On this level, “Nizhnii Novgorod province” is merely a technical, administrative designation. Next, however, *provintsiia*, in Russian as in English, denotes the opposite of “capital” or “center.” “Province” can thus refer to every space that is not one of the two capital cities, St. Petersburg and Moscow (although, as we will see, even those cities can potentially contain “provincial” aspects). The term, naturally, may have a pejorative aspect, but it also became imbued with positive content. It is essential to note that I am not overly concerned with the distinction between “province” and “region,” and I frequently use the terms interchangeably.¹¹ This is because what is important to me is to take a slice—any slice, let it be arbitrary—of the local and to see how interactions work out within that space. I find it helpful to think of the “province” as a complex system—a set of shifting relationships and interactions that together make up a larger whole.¹² The province, in addition,

is porous: commercial, intellectual, and political activities transcend any given geographical boundaries. To repeat, then, when I speak of “province” I am concerned with human beings’ interactions with each other and with their surrounding environment on a territory not limited to St. Petersburg and Moscow.

Fortunately for the present study, since my first journey to Nizhnii Novgorod and the several subsequent sojourns that followed, the literature on regions, provinces, and local history has experienced a resurgence. Until the 1990s, the sole article explicitly addressing such issues remained Carsten Goehrke’s “The Problem of Regionalism in Russian History” (1978).¹⁵ Since then, historians in different countries—most notably Germany, the United States, and Russia—have developed different approaches to local history in Russia.¹⁴ The American literature has experienced something of an obsession, in the last fifteen years, with problems of empire. While the production is too vast to review here, one result is that, to the degree that specifically local or regional issues are addressed, they usually focus on borderlands, peripheries, and “non-Russian nationalities.”¹⁵ Most relevant to the present undertaking are investigations of specific areas, such as Robert Geraci’s work on Kazan or Willard Sunderland’s on colonization and migration in South Russia.¹⁶ The problem of empire has also generated a plethora of international conferences, where problems of regions have been addressed in a variety of contexts.¹⁷ In Germany, while the imperial focus has produced some extremely important work—most notably Andreas Kappeler’s *Rußland als Vielvölkerreich*—the issue of regionalism has tended to be linked, in addition, to investigations of the middle class. Thus, significant studies, especially by Lutz Häfner and Guido Hausmann, have grown out of Jürgen Kocka’s massive project on the European *Bürgertum* (bourgeoisie). Hausmann and Häfner propose to envision society as a local project (the difficult-to-translate *Veranstaltung*), turning their attention to associations, self-management, and sociability in provincial towns.¹⁸

The most interesting historiographical developments, however, have taken place within Russia itself, in part because the relation between the center and the regions (the “subjects of the federation,” as they became known in political discourse) has occupied a major place in the transformations of the Soviet Union and Russia since 1989. Nizhnii Novgorod has been more emblematic of these changes than most other provincial cities or regions. If the Soviet city of Gorky stood at once for military might, industrial production, and political repression (the site, most famously, of Andrei Sakharov’s exile), in the early 1990s it became, in a carnivalesque inversion, the symbol of regional autonomy, a nascent democratic movement, and a passionate rediscovery of the local past. Local intellectuals saw the Soviet Union’s collapse as the final and inevitable result of the subjugation of the regions to Moscow’s tyranny.¹⁹ Boris Nemtsov became the first among the Russian Federation’s rebellious and civically active regional governors, while the future leader of the democratic Iabloko

caucus, Grigorii Iavlinskii, sought to create a prototype of a new democratic Russia precisely in the Nizhnii Novgorod region.²⁰ Architects and amateur historians, in the meantime, turned an obsessive eye to the cityscape, carefully reconstructing its center in accordance with nineteenth-century blueprints (albeit in a postmodern purple and yellow color scheme). It was an era that came to a close recently, as President Vladimir Putin in 2005 mandated central appointment of regional governors, while regional success and prosperity have moved into direct correlation to the production and processing of oil.²¹

In historiography, I would characterize the trend as a shift away from the narrow concerns of *kraevedenie* typical of the late Soviet period—in which local historians painstakingly avoided any larger implications of their cultivation of minutiae. If the American and German literature links regional history to problems of empire and to the development of the middle classes, respectively, within Russia the concept of “province” (*provintsiia*) has come to play an increasingly important role. Here, as well, Nizhnii Novgorod occupies a special place. A harbinger of the new orientation was V. P. Makarikhin’s published doctoral dissertation on the provincial archival commissions, a field of study that has subsequently flourished under the direction of S. O. Schmidt in Moscow.²² Another publication, *The Russian Provinces: Myth—Text—Reality*, marked the culmination of interdisciplinary investigation, from the perspective of philologists and anthropologists, of the world of the Russian provinces.²³ A plethora of papers and articles dealing with the issues of “capitals and provinces” has appeared at conferences and in journals. Detailed investigations of local history have become a staple of international conferences dedicated to nineteenth-century history.²⁴

I would like to single out two books that seem to me particularly important. The first is Tatiana Vinogradova’s *Nizhegorodskaia intelligentsia: vokrug N. A. Dobroliubova* (The Nizhnii Novgorod Intelligentsia: Around N. A. Dobroliubov).²⁵ Vinogradova, a structural engineer by profession, traces her own roots (her grandmother was Dobroliubov’s cousin) to recreate a remarkable picture of an upright, sometimes prosperous middle-class clerical family against whose background the most famous member, the radical Nikolai Dobroliubov, looks like a black sheep. In the process she successfully portrays the local intelligentsia—physicians, priests, bureaucrats, middling urban property-owners—who formed the backbone of nineteenth-century provincial society. The second is Viktor Berdinskikh’s book, *Uezdnye istoriki* (2004), specifically dedicated to provincial historiography.²⁶ Animated by a desire to “elevate local material to a national [*rossiiskii*] level,” Berdinskikh’s book unites his doctoral dissertation on the provincial statistical committees and the development of a provincial historiographical tradition with an in-depth study (previously published in Kirov in a minute run) of historians in Viatka province.²⁷ Educated in Gor’ki, where he was a student in the 1970s, and inspired by the same materials that prompted the present study, Berdinskikh

posits the independence of provincial intellectual life and brings to the forefront the extraordinarily active role of the statistical committees and the originality of the historical investigations they engendered.

What is missing, however, is a coherent perspective on the Russian provinces—an approach and a methodology that would permit the deconstruction of nineteenth-century Russia into smaller provincial units, and a subsequent reconstruction that will provide us with a revised vision of the country as a whole. In Susan Smith-Peter's words, "The local is a window onto Russia. It provides the scholar with a much richer understanding of how the majority of Russians lived, many of them far away from the capitals. After extensive and intensive study of all of Russia's regions, scholars in both East and West will have a clearer vision of how events and social processes actually unfolded."²⁸ The purpose of this book is to provide, by working with extremely specific and detailed concrete materials, one possible framework for the study of Russian regions in the nineteenth century. The province needs to be studied not for its own sake (the pursuit of *kraevedenie* or local history) but as an integral and indispensable part of a larger historical narrative.

Nizhnii Novgorod Province in Historical Perspective

Nizhnii Novgorod in the nineteenth century—like every other individual province—was unique, special, and unusual. The province covered a territory of some 250 square versts—about the size, the 1865 *Pamiatnaia knizhka* pointed out with some pride, of the Papal States, Switzerland, the kingdoms of the Netherlands, Belgium, Hannover, Württemberg, or Greece. The population of 1.2 million had increased to 1.5 million by 1900. The *guberniia* was divided into two unequal parts (north and south) by the flow of the Volga: the only black soil was in the southeastern corner (Lukoianov and Kniagin in districts). The city of Nizhnii Novgorod itself, with a population of some 40,000, perched picturesquely (as it still does) on the cliffs at the confluence of the Volga and its tributary, the Oka; the forests north of the Volga still stretch as far as one can see if one stands along the mansion-lined embankment. Smaller towns like the ancient Gorodets or Balakhna appear along the banks as one travels up the Volga. Official estimates counted some 32,000 Old Believers and members of *edinoverie*, or "united faith" (a figure that, as we shall see, is likely far too low), and 37,000 Muslims.²⁹ The major local ethnic groups were Tatars, Mordva, and Mari (known in the nineteenth century as Cheremiss).

Nonresidents knew the area best for its yearly fair—a colorful summertime convergence of East and West where China tea merchants, Astrakhan fish peddlers, Russian textile producers, and European visitors came together to exchange goods. From its beginnings in sixteenth-century Muscovy, the Makar'ev Fair—named after its original site by the monastery at Makar'ev—expanded to become the largest trade fair in Europe, larger even than that of Leipzig. Apart from its purely commercial function, the fair naturally attracted

a variety of entertainments and activities—including “Parisian” magic lantern slides, theatrical shows, taverns, and brothels, as well as a thriving hotel and restaurant business. Even at midcentury the fair attracted more than a million visitors, dwarfing the provincial capital’s year-round population of thirty-five thousand.³⁰

Nizhnii Novgorod’s significance as a commercial hub was perhaps the most obvious, but certainly not the only, distinctive feature of the province. Pavel Ivanovich Mel’nikov (pseud. Andrei Pecherskii), a native of the region, in the 1870s crafted a powerful and influential depiction in his diptych novels, *In the Forests* and *On the Hills*. Like no other writer, he captured on paper the rough, tough world of the rich Old Believer merchants (known as “thousanders” or even “millioners”), and the mysterious life of the female-dominated monasteries (sketes) deep in the forests beyond the Volga. Nizhnii Novgorod province was distinguished from other places by the prevalence of the Old Belief. The seventeenth-century group known as the Zealots of Piety—Ivan Neronov, the archpriest Avvakum, and the eventual patriarch Nikon—were from the province and held their early discussions there. After their cataclysmic falling out, and Nikon’s condemnation of his erstwhile fellows at the 1666 All-Russian Council of the Orthodox Church, Avvakum and his followers returned to the trans-Volga forests, taking refuge from persecution.

Except for its fertile southeast corner, Nizhnii Novgorod province was characterized by relatively poor soil. Artisanal production—known as *kustar*—prevailed, and the region became famous for the production of knives, locks, scissors, and other metal products; leather goods; and wooden dishes and implements of all kinds (known to present-day consumers as *khokhloma*, named after the village). Iron ore was mined and processed at the metallurgical plants in the southwest corner of the province—notably, located well outside any urban center. One of the major enterprises of the industrial age, specializing in metallurgy and shipbuilding, was located at Sormovo in Balakhna district (now inside the city of Nizhnii Novgorod). Some of the earliest workers’ communities—eventually the subject of Maksim Gorky’s novels—grew up in Sormovo in the 1840s.³¹

Nizhnii Novgorod also formed part of a larger universe, constituted together with the other provinces, each with its own unique characteristics. The provincial world followed its own chronology, at once distinct from and intersecting with that of the center. In the late eighteenth century, the province emerged as the object of administrative recrafting, territorial measurement, travel description, and religious conversion. Catherine II’s provincial reform, in 1775, fragmented the old administrative units (*namestnichestva*) into fifty regular, and rather arbitrary, provinces (*gubernii*), each with ten districts and an evenly distributed population of about three hundred thousand.³² It was Catherine, as well, who launched the first comprehensive land survey, with teams of surveyors fanning out through the provinces in an effort to systematize information on

villages and their lands. The survey, which began in 1766, continued well into the nineteenth century.⁵³ The provinces attracted the attention of voyagers as well, most notably the German traveler Peter Simon Pallas (1741–1811), whose work and travel in the Urals, the Altai, and Transcaucasus under the auspices of Catherine II’s “academic expedition” (1768–1774) remain one of the most useful ethnographic and natural-historical descriptions of the region. Pallas passed through Nizhnii Novgorod on his way east, and his *Reise durch verschiedene Provinzen des russischen Reichs* contains a fascinating description of the leather manufactures at Arzamas (one of the district capitals).⁵⁴ Not only the central government but also the Orthodox Church demonstrated engagement with the provinces, continuing an old tradition that can be traced at least to Stefan of Perm’, who in the fourteenth century converted the Komi of the Perm’ region. In the Nizhnii Novgorod region, the Petrine period was marked mainly by a vociferous struggle against the Old Belief. By the late eighteenth century, attention had shifted to the Finnic, Turkic, and other peoples of the Volga basin. The erudite Bishop Damaskin (Rudnev) (1783–1794), a graduate of Göttingen University and erstwhile prominent Moscow cleric, oversaw the publication of grammars and Bibles in Mordvinian and Chuvash.

From the local perspective, however, the real animation of the provincial scene begins in the 1830s, during the reign of Nicholas I. A key part of the “Nicholas system” was a significant change in the concept of rule: if Alexander had made do with the relatively loose control of administratively appointed governors, rotating from post to post, Nicholas wanted to rule the country in a hands-on way. The monarch himself, following Catherine’s lead, paid a visit to Nizhnii Novgorod in 1834—a visit that resulted in the complete reorganization and restructuring of the urban landscape through the concerted efforts of local society. A comprehensive local government reform followed in 1837, granting considerable powers to the local governors and also to the city dumas, making the provincial board into an executive rather than a consultative body and strengthening the local police. To Nicholas, the path to total control lay through total knowledge: if all information on every part of the empire could be collected and organized—everything from population to industrial production to indigenous legal codes (including data for Siberia)—the capacity for perfect control would be one step closer. Therefore, such institutions as the Imperial Geographical Society and the Central Statistical Committee, established in Nicholas’s reign, are as essential to his “system” as the more familiar Third Section (the secret police) or the new Code of Law. Local statistical committees (1834) and the *Gubernskie vedomosti* (Provincial Gazettes)—the first legal locally produced provincial newspaper, established throughout Russia in 1838—delegated responsibility to the local level and became visible harbingers of a local consciousness. At the same time, Minister of Internal Affairs Lev Perovskii’s trusted *chinovniki osobykh poruchenii*—“agents for special commissions” assigned to the local governors—provided a means for effective governance that

circumvented the increasingly unwieldy bureaucracy.⁵⁵ Cadastral descriptions and statistical and ethnographic studies supplemented the earlier, vaguer travelers' reports. Ironically, this notoriously centralized and bureaucratized reign witnessed an increasing reliance on local institutions, thus posing an essential paradox of nineteenth-century rule: the necessity, for efficient governance, of a significant measure of local autonomy.⁵⁶

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of the Great Reforms for the Russian provinces. Alexander II's revolution from above transformed and reoriented the force fields that defined people's daily existence. The reforms affected provincial Russian society as much as, and perhaps more than, they did the emancipated peasantry itself. Emancipation created a whole set of needs for mediation between the state and the peasantry—needs that were filled by the growing numbers of doctors, clergy, statisticians, agronomists, lawyers, and zemstvo politicians. The reforms created a space in which a new kind of person could flourish. The result was, by the 1870s, a renaissance in which provincial cities were transformed from administrative outposts of a powerful central government into local centers with a burgeoning local press, an explosion of commerce, an active scientific and literary life, a steadily increasing prosperity, and a growing consciousness of their own local identity and potential political weight. From the vantage point of Nizhnii Novgorod, Frederick Starr's assertion that 1870 marked an end to decentralization looks nothing short of absurd and signals the peculiarity of a central approach to local issues: if indeed the central government ceased to promote "the local" in its legislation, this was because the initiative had passed to the provinces. By 1870, individuals and institutions on the local level had taken matters into their own hands, managing economic affairs, creating infrastructure (such as water supply and public transportation), organizing health care and education, and working out taxation mechanisms that bypassed entirely the domain of the central government. The flowering of the provinces continued unabated until the Revolution of 1905 and beyond.

The crucial institution here was the zemstvo. The zemstvos, when they were established as a bureaucratic measure in 1864, were conceived primarily, if not solely, as a more efficient tax-gathering system (Nicholas I's bureaucracy had proved incapable of controlling the entire fiscal network from the center).⁵⁷ Apart from maintaining their own properties and handling their own taxes, the zemstvos, set up at first in thirty-four provinces of European Russia, were supposed to oversee the distribution of goods and food reserves in case of poor harvest; maintain roads and bridges; manage social welfare, insurance, and church construction; provide for health and education; stimulate animal husbandry and agronomy; regulate the postal service and the military draft; manage finances coming from the central government and from the local population; and serve as a channel of communication between local society and the center. The most important of these functions, especially at the beginning, proved to be education and medicine. An entire network of zemstvo-run schools

was created under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, whose function was to teach basic literacy to the children of the new free peasants. The zemstvos established what was virtually a socialized health care system, with the character of the rural physician becoming a major new figure in the post-emancipation countryside—and in literature as well.

Second, this was the first institution in modern Russia that brought the different classes together, instead of segregating them in organizations for separate estates (*soslovie*) like the gentry assembly (dating to the era of Catherine II). Whatever the limitations on suffrage—and they were standard for most of the European world in the second half of the nineteenth century—Russia's population over the course of the four decades between 1864 and the establishment of a national representative government in 1905 grew accustomed to the process of going to the polls and making a choice of political representation.

The Nizhnii Novgorod provincial zemstvo was one of the most dynamic among the thirty-four such institutions. The zemstvos' functions included oversight of peasant affairs, land redistribution, local administration (police, courts, statistics), transportation, and property taxes. Responsibility for medicine, veterinary medicine, education, pensions, railroads, commerce, welfare, agricultural credit, and insurance gradually emerged as some of the zemstvos' top priorities. The 1864 law gave the zemstvos the right to collect and spend their own taxes; a good deal of decision-making power thus devolved onto this local institution. The Nizhnii Novgorod zemstvo built schools, hospitals, and roads, set up sanitation and lighting systems, and provided fire insurance. Some of its most significant initiatives included an ultimately unsuccessful bid for the Trans-Siberian Railroad, "restoring the old natural route through Nizhnii Novgorod province to Siberia and Central Asia"; a constant struggle against the epidemics that periodically wound their way up the Volga; and an extremely sophisticated local cadaster (1880s–1890s), funded by the zemstvo, executed by scientists from St. Petersburg, and intended to create an absolutely equitable system of land taxation and distribution.⁵⁸

Two modifications need to be made to the traditional perspective on the zemstvo. First, we need to go more local, because much real activity took place on the district rather than the provincial level. Second, we need to move outward from the local back to the national and international, examining links and interactions. The last third of the nineteenth century was the "Age of Congresses." Every action of the Nizhnii Novgorod zemstvo became inscribed in larger efforts. While the oldest and best-known civic institutions remained the Free Economic Society and the Russian Technical Society, a plethora of ad hoc or regular meetings appeared, from the bottom up, in every profession and organization.⁵⁹ Thus, the National Statistical Congress in 1870, followed by the St. Petersburg International Congress two years later; the Ninth Congress of Naturalists and Physicians in the 1890s, and so on, became particularly significant for working out local agendas. A network of "invisible threads"

linked the provinces to each other and to the nation as a whole, providing a mechanism for coordinating strategies of management. Only the legislative function was missing, prompting the classic complaint of a “building without a cupola” and the call for a *zemstvo* council (*zemskii sobor*). An extensive “crypto-parliamentary” system introduced issues of national concern, while their resolution was limited to the local level.⁴⁰

Taking my cue from the provinces themselves, I have focused on the period 1840–1900 or, more accurately, the mid-1830s through the mid-1890s. The administrative integration of the provinces (1837) or, in cultural terms, the establishment of the *Gubernskie vedomosti* (1838) marks the starting point. I have chosen to stop in the 1890s, because the realignments and mobilization of social forces with the approach of revolution in 1904–1907 create a whole new set of questions. These questions surely need to be investigated from a provincial perspective as well, but my primary purpose here is to establish the very existence of the provincial universe as a necessary “first step.”⁴¹ Thus, the bulk of my materials belongs to the initial major upswing in the Russian provinces, from the 1870s and onward. The traditional cycle of “reform” and “counter-reform,” so influential in the historiography, is of very little relevance from a provincial perspective.

Purveyors of the Province

We still think of the 1870s as the era of “going to the people.” Young people flocked to the countryside, heeding the call of Bakunin or Lavrov—who, respectively, urged them to foment revolution or bring enlightenment to the peasant population.⁴² The populist intelligentsia felt a pervasive sense of responsibility for the plight of the *narod* (people) and believed that they had a monopoly on understanding them. At one point they caused the poet and conservative Afanasii Fet to retreat to his country estate, complaining of a dual autocracy—the official state on one hand, and the populist intelligentsia on the other. It is rare that one group of people, however disparate they may be, has succeeded for so long in imposing its particular vision of society on its own and subsequent generations. The populist intelligentsia, apart from the vehemence with which they pursued their political quest, also created a powerful and nearly indelible picture of a refined and possibly “critically thinking” elite intelligently confronting the benighted peasant masses and nudging them onto the path of progress; images of Russian backwardness, insuperable gaps between the intelligentsia and the people, an inert and unresponsive autocracy, as well as the possibility of “skipping a stage” and avoiding the pitfalls of capitalism and industrialization are a few of the tropes that the populists, broadly speaking, bequeathed to the future. This legacy received a new lease on life through its appropriation by Soviet ideology, of which it formed a significant component.

It was populism, as well, that constructed a particular chronology of the

post-reform period. The history of the Russian intelligentsia in the nineteenth century has long had its accepted chronology. The “parting of the ways” between state and educated society in the reign of Nicholas I was followed by a moment of consensus on the eve of reform, when even Alexander Herzen praised his royal namesake: “Thou hast conquered, Galilean!” According to the classic picture bequeathed to us by the radical intelligentsia themselves, the upswing of “going to the people” in the 1870s was followed by a lull in the 1880s when “politics” broke off, to be resumed only in the wake of famine in 1891.

There is a thread that runs counter to this narrative that I would like to trace by turning to the history of the intelligentsia from a *local* perspective. Bakunin, Chernyshevsky, Lavrov, Nechaev, and other figures familiar from the history of Russian thought—and, it might be added, the revolutionary tradition—do not tell the whole tale of “critically thinking individuals” in Russian society nor do they exhaust the potential for the creation of “social values” by such individuals. The life stories and ideas of Pavel Ivanovich Mel’nikov, Aleksandr Serafimovich Gatsiskii, Vasilii Vasil’evich Dokuchaev, and Andrei Osipovich Karelin are closely intertwined with the history of Nizhnii Novgorod province. Their evolution points at once to a different chronology as well as to the existence of a provincial intelligentsia whose passionate engagement with things local provides a significant counterpoint to the apparent progression of Russian thought over the nineteenth century. They may each have had a different mission, but they were extremely conscious of their own calling to convey their vision, particularly in opposition to that of populists. The latter, to those who had dedicated their entire lives to immersion in the local, looked like naïve urban dwellers, with unrealistic and unusable ideas about “the people.” The provincial intelligentsia crafted their image of the province through “boring” means—statistics, record keeping, detailed ethnographic studies—rather than radical ideological positions or quasi-religious calls to arms.

Like nationalism, which, it has been argued, began in nineteenth-century central Europe with movements of intellectuals, Russian provincialism was a creation of an intelligentsia. In Nizhnii Novgorod alone one can count at least a half dozen of the most visible such individuals and tens of other minor figures. Here, however, I am interested not merely in the “provincial activist” (*provintsial’nyi deiatel’*), of whom there were hundreds or even thousands throughout Russia, but in particular persons whose goal was to depict, describe, conceptualize, present, and promote the province. It is through them that the Nizhnii Novgorod–Volga region speaks to us across more than a century of revolutionary change and turmoil. I have called these individuals “purveyors of the province,” for they were entirely self-conscious about doing precisely that, whether for their own contemporaries or for future generations—including future historians. This book could not have been written without the purveyors. I would like to introduce here those four who are most significant for this book.



FIG. 1.1. P. I. Mel'nikov.
From V. F. Timm, *Russkii khudozhestvennyi listok* (St. Petersburg, 1859).



FIG. 1.2. A. S. Gatsiskii.
From K. D. Aleksandrov, ed., *A. S. Gatsiskii (1838–1938)* (Gorky, 1939).



FIG. 1.3. A. O. Karelin.
From A. O. Karelin, *Andrei Osipovich Karelin: tvorcheskoe nasledie* (Nizhnii Novgorod, 1990).



FIG. 1.4. V. V. Dokuchaev.
From <http://taina.kz/dic.nsf/ruwiki/904179>.

Pavel Ivanovich Mel'nikov (1819–1883)

The son of a minor landowner in the remote and densely forested Semënov district and a graduate of Kazan University, Pavel Ivanovich Mel'nikov made his mark as editor of the recently established *Gubernskie vedomosti*, which he transformed from a terse compendium of governmental directives into a vibrant annual of local life and history.⁴³ He also made his mark as an ethnographer, one who, while occupying a series of positions in the state bureaucracy, compiled an abundance of materials on the region's inhabitants, particularly the Old Believers. Mel'nikov is an archetypal character of the Nicholaevan period: appointed agent for special commissions to the military governor, Prince Urusov, under the patronage of Lev Perovskii in 1847, Mel'nikov distinguished himself by the extraordinary zeal with which he performed his duties to the state.⁴⁴ His secret report on the Old Belief, commissioned by the government, provided a wealth of detail accessible only to a true insider, including not just accurate statistics on population but also, for example, precise places of residence, migratory patterns, linguistic codes, and the workings of the "Old Believer mail," including the exact names of the "postmasters." The report was published only in 1911, under the auspices of the Nizhnii Novgorod Provincial Archival Commission; in its unpublished version, however, its recommendation "to destroy the sketes completely, never again allowing any building on their site," decisively shaped the Nicholaevan project of extermination of the Old Belief and gave the government the necessary tools to do that by providing excruciatingly precise information.⁴⁵ With respect to the Gorodets chapel, for example, Mel'nikov advised, if it were not judged prudent to destroy it completely, at least to wreck all buildings around it, dig a moat around the cemetery, and remove the cross and all liturgical implements; so well did Mel'nikov know his subject that he could even recommend filling the hole in which baptismal water was poured and destroying the two rooms adjacent to the chapel, where truant Orthodox priests heard confessions.⁴⁶

Paradoxically, these researches bore fruit in Mel'nikov's extraordinarily rich and basically sympathetic two-volume fictional account of Old Believer life, *In the Forests* and *On the Hills*, composed under the pseudonym Andrei Pecherskii in the 1870s. Apparently, Mel'nikov's saga originated in the tales he recounted to the subsequently deceased heir to the throne, Nicholas, in the course of a voyage down the Volga in 1861.⁴⁷ It is hard to imagine a reader who would be immune to the adventures of Chapurin, Dunia Smolokurova and Samokvasov, Flënushka, and Mother Manefa, the colorful descriptions of food and drink, the sagas of Siberian gold hunting, the pervasive sexuality, the sectarian passions, the materiality of the Old Believer faith, and the near-photographic depictions of "material culture"—peasant huts, merchant houses, feasts and rituals, marriage by abduction, the barges carrying Astrakhan fish up the Volga, the life of the wooden-spoon makers.⁴⁸ Me'lnikov is a purveyor *avant la lettre*—a

loyal state servitor, he immersed himself in the local through his appointments at the *Gubernskie vedomosti* and as state functionary and transmitted its content to his readers, to the government, and, finally, to us, both as historians and as an avid reading public.⁴⁹

Aleksandr Serafimovich Gatsiskii (1838–1893)

The purveyor par excellence is Aleksandr Serafimovich Gatsiskii. Gatsiskii came to Nizhnii from Riazan' at the age of nine and eventually dedicated his life to things local—as he jokingly put it, to “Nizhnii Novgorod knowing” and “Nizhnii Novgorod doing” (*nizhegorodovedenie* and *nizhegorododelanie*) from the moment of his return from a brief stint at St. Petersburg University in the crucial year, 1861. Gatsiskii's curriculum vitae is a whirlwind of local activity: founder of the local statistical committee and editor of its papers, president of the local provincial archival commission, member of the *zemstvo* (at moments when he was able to meet the property qualification) and at one time its president, and author of some four hundred articles on local history, popular religion, archaeology, ethnography, and statistics. Gatsiskii entered the national limelight in the 1870s as the defender of the “provincial idea”—the notion, in part inspired by populist thinker and historian Afanasii Shchapov's (1830–1876) regionalism (*oblastnichestvo*)—that Russia's provinces had a crucial role to play in national development.⁵⁰ He represented his province at national statistical congresses, festivals, and meetings of the archival commissions. At moments when Gatsiskii was not studying the local, he was conveying it to others. His profile is characterized by an extraordinary self-consciousness, to the point of being quite well aware of the uses of his materials by future historians. It is his voice that has shaped parts of this book more than anyone else's.⁵¹

Andrei Osipovich Karelin (1837–1906)

Occupying a special place in this list is a St. Petersburg photographer who came to Nizhnii Novgorod in 1866 for health reasons. Andrei Osipovich Karelin was first of all an artist.⁵² Yet, the particular medium in which he worked had unusual potential for the purveying function. Karelin actually took his camera inside the bourgeois household, capturing on film images of families, ladies distributing charity, girls in conversation, loving couples, and other domestic scenes. Trained as an icon painter in his youth in his native Tambov province, Karelin received his academic education at the St. Petersburg Academy of Fine Arts; it was there that he discovered photography, or “light-writing” (*svetopis'*). His studio in Nizhnii Novgorod produced, of course, the requisite cartes-de-visite and portraits of local notables (some of which won prizes in Paris, Philadelphia, and Edinburgh); the repertoire included ethnographic subjects, landscapes, and a plethora of views of Nizhnii Novgorod and the fair. The photographs included in one of his albums of the 1870s, *Art Photography of Life Subjects*, are among his most ambitious as art. Instead of merely relying on circumstantial evidence—

the books, journals, and newspapers they read, the theatrical performances they attended, the musical and scientific societies they founded—we here have access to the provincial middle classes themselves, productively mediated by the artistic imagination of the photographer. Karelin as an artist is a purveyor of the provincial bourgeoisie, combining representation of the subjects with a carefully orchestrated portrayal of their domestic environment and providing them with an aesthetic language through which to speak for themselves.

Mostly, Karelin's contribution was through photographic images, but his social persona was also exemplary of a provincial activist. A member of the local *zemstvo* and of the archival commission (it was his job to take pictures of ethnographic objects), he was present everywhere the cream of Nizhnii Novgorod society gathered. Furthermore, he joined others in the province in providing international exposure: his prize-winning expositions brought the most intimate details of provincial culture to an international audience.

Vasilii Vasil'evich Dokuchaev (1846–1903)

A scientist now known as the founder of the discipline of soil science, Vasilii Vasil'evich Dokuchaev holds a no less special place in the pantheon of Nizhnii Novgorod purveyors.⁵⁵ Dokuchaev was a *popovich*—the son of a provincial priest in Smolensk.⁵⁴ A graduate of the Smolensk seminary, he came to Petersburg to study at the Theological Academy at the height of the reform era, in 1867. A mere three weeks spent frequenting the public lectures of St. Petersburg University professors in the shopping arcade off Nevsky Prospect brought about an abrupt shift in Dokuchaev's intellectual orientation: he abandoned his theological studies in favor of natural history at the university. By 1870, his successes in geology and mineralogy earned him an appointment as curator of the Geological Collection at St. Petersburg University—a post he retained for a number of years as he progressed, with stellar success, up the academic ladder to appointments as associate (*dotsent*) and then professor at the university.

In the post-reform period, the passion for scientific exploration turned inward, to the provinces of the Russian Empire, as well as outward, to its more exotic peripheries.⁵⁵ This provincial version of expeditionary science was, if anything, more productive or at least more systematic than its more far-flung equivalent; relative proximity to the laboratories and universities of the capitals, the absence of physical danger, and familiarity of language and custom facilitated a kind of “thick description” of some Russian provinces, in geological and biological terms, that Przheval'skii or Semënov Tian-Shanskii could only have envied.⁵⁶ Dokuchaev's fate became linked to Nizhnii Novgorod as he worked on the book that established his professional reputation, *The Russian Chernozem* (1883). Responding to an invitation by the Nizhnii Novgorod provincial *zemstvo*, Dokuchaev, accompanied by three student assistants, arrived on the scene in the summer of 1882 to begin a three-year intensive survey of the local soils. The expedition was also sponsored, at various points, by the

St. Petersburg Society of Naturalists, the Mineralogical Society, the Congress of Naturalists and Physicians, the Imperial Department of Forestry, and the Free Economic Society. The team members spent their days combing the province, describing every stream and forested glade, every field and every ravine. The result was an exhaustive description, published in fourteen volumes, not only of the soil itself but also of aspects of the flora and fauna; such content made it an invaluable resource and a first step on the path to Dokuchaev's dream of reconstructing "all three Kingdoms of Nature in all their diversity."⁵⁷ In the Nizhnii Novgorod studies, Dokuchaev shows himself as an important founder of environmental studies as well as of soil science *tout court*.⁵⁸ Dokuchaev's work thus becomes for us an extraordinary repository of information about the provincial environment, as well as about aspects of local material culture.⁵⁹

Although Dokuchaev was not a native Nizhnii Novgorodian, he formed a part of the provincial milieu that was home to Gatsiskii and Karelin as well. Inspired by a similar wish to go "to the interior," he was equally inspired by the ideal of scientific education.⁶⁰ Among his socially oriented projects were the founding of agricultural institutes, meteorological stations, and a network of natural history museums that would conserve, study, and publicize at the same time.

These four characters by no means exhaust the list of local actors who speak to us through their activism and recording of local life. Close upon their heels follow, for example, Vladimir Korolenko, whose *Pavlovo Sketches* and memoir accounts of the 1891 famine in Lukoianov district provide a literary sketch of Nizhnii Novgorod material culture; such figures as A. A. Savel'ev, V. I. Snezhnevskii, and A. I. Zvezdin, who were Gatsiskii's colleagues and successors in the archival commissions and elsewhere; the zemstvo statistician N. F. Annenskii, whose socioeconomic study supplemented Dokuchaev's investigation of the soil; Dokuchaev's student N. M. Sibirtsev, who remained in Nizhnii Novgorod and became an avid local activist; the priest L. Borisovskii, whose lovely sketch of Semënov woodworking captured on paper an entire way of life; Makarii, a bishop and the author of a history of the Nizhnii Novgorod ecclesiastical hierarchy; not to mention counterparts in neighboring provinces, such as N. Ia. Agafonov in Kazan, A. A. Dmitriev in Perm', A. V. Smirnov in Vladimir, or the nameless dozens of researchers—some of them priests, teachers, and lawyers—who contributed vast materials to the statistical, meteorological, ethnographic, and historical researches initiated by the statistical committees, local museums, and archival commissions. Mel'nikov, Gatsiskii, Karelin, and Dokuchaev, like dozens mentioned and hundreds unmentioned in this book, helped create nineteenth-century knowledge and culture in Nizhnii Novgorod.

Structure of the Book

Throughout this study, I have tried to avoid viewing the province in isolation—and thus avoid ascribing an artificial autonomy—and instead to see it in

interaction with other regions and with the center. The structure of the book reflects this effort. The first six chapters together re-create the “organic province,” proceeding from a detailed investigation of the local environment, through the ways in which local residents coexisted with the natural world, and concluding in an effort to penetrate—through numbers, images, and biographies—the social universe of the Nizhnii Novgorod region. Even here, we observe a constant counterpoint between the observed natural environment and its observers—the nineteenth-century scientists and ethnographers who provide us with their data. The remaining chapters turn to the ways in which the province was inscribed in national patterns, identifying “structures”—largely given by the central administration—and the “visions,” sometimes overpowering the original central impetus, with which individuals and institutions responded on the local level. Specifically, these chapters deal with administration and politics, ecclesiastical structures, and aspects of cultural history. The final chapter, “The Idea of Province,” examines elements of a provincial identity as it emerged through the understanding of the local environment and the construction of a local past.

Throughout the book, I have interspersed relatively general overviews with extremely specific case studies. Thus, the investigation of artisanal production illuminates an example of provincial economic life on a level of detail that, according to my general methodology, is the only possible means of truly apprehending and achieving a tactile understanding of “proto-industrial” manufacture. The chapter on the zemstvo cadaster, likewise, illustrates an aspect of local administration and permits us to see the precise manner in which zemstvo institutions, specifically in Nizhnii Novgorod, were given, and then arrogated to themselves, financial and allocational functions that in many other states remained the preserve of the central government. Only by understanding the very specific can we proceed back to new generalizations and a new apprehension of the Russian nineteenth century.



If, in our usual conception, nineteenth-century Russia appears as a vast, uniform, centralized state, socially and economically polarized, and primarily agrarian and resistant to change, the picture that emerges from the present study is quite different. Strategies of survival in an environment that was characterized by a constant slow flux produced a variety of occupations and social divisions completely impenetrable to official categories: instead of only peasants and landlords, we see a countryside peopled by wooden-spoon makers, fishnet weavers, itinerant icon sellers, and the middlemen and creditors who maintained this subsistence economy. Some forms of artisanal activity—notably sheepskin processing, steel products, and wooden implements—were successful enough to compete with factory production. Even within the province of Nizhnii Novgorod, we see stark local divisions and an exchange economy in which the rich southeastern black-soil provinces supplied the infertile northern forest areas with grain, while the latter kept the south provided with timber and wood

products. Instead of a centrally administered state, we see the predominance of local initiative in the crafting of a cadaster, on an extremely high scientific level, in order to orchestrate the fair and equitable distribution of local taxes—an important function of the *zemstvo*. Moreover, the flourishing of local statistics, the collection of documents of local history, and the promotion of a local culture brought the province of Nizhnii Novgorod (itself the size of Württemberg in the newly unified German Reich) into synchrony with precisely analogous developments in regions of other European countries. Once we break Russia down into smaller entities, it starts to resemble its European counterparts in unexpected ways.

Inevitably, the question of Russia's place in the European nineteenth century then arises. Was it a "proto-industrial" society resembling that of other societies before the Industrial Revolution (and thus a society that was "lagging behind")? Did its mode of organization point to a "third way" or special path? Or was it doomed to disaster, which then followed in the form of the Bolshevik Revolution? I have sought to free myself from these questions that haunted my own early acquaintance with Russian history. Yet, in doing so, there is a sort of answer: my goal has been quite simply to ask what was there, rather than what was not or what went wrong. Without denying that Russia remained more dependent upon its agrarian economy than its European counterparts, I propose that agrarian reform—as well as industrial revolution—can result in intensive social change and specifically in the emergence of groups of people who then work to further economic growth. Artisanal production and the scattering of factories throughout the countryside in Russia probably resembled pre-industrial France or England more than they did the landscapes described by Zola or Lawrence. But at the same time, many of the problems faced and the solutions proposed by people in the Russian provinces were synchronous with those encountered by their European contemporaries. As we will see, administrative structures, scientific advances, musical performances, and literary endeavors partook fully in the process of European culture *in the mid-nineteenth century* and not at some earlier time. Neither was Russia following an alternative path, nor was it doomed to disaster. Rather, the Russian province presents one variant, one particular combination of similar factors, in a general and diverse European pattern.