



BRILL

# Conflict, Social Identity, and Violence in the World of Russian Rural Medicine: Two Chekhov Stories

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## Abstract

Anton Chekhov's stories "An Unpleasantness" (1888) and "Thieves" (1890) provide nuanced portrayals of the world of rural medicine in late tsarist Russia. The stories, which are rooted in the historical experience of zemstvo medicine, explore the conflicts and everyday travails that physicians and feldshers encountered in their zemstvo service. This article locates the stories in the historical environment of the time in which they are set. Chekhov focuses particular attention upon physicians' and feldshers' preoccupation with their status and social identity together with their relationships both with one another and with their zemstvo employers. The stories suggest the ways in which the frustrations and conflicts of rural practice fostered an undercurrent of despair or even violence within the zemstvo medical world itself. Within the stories, Chekhov explicitly links his protagonists' everyday experience to the transformations that occur in their overall consciousness.

## Keywords

Anton Chekhov – rural medicine – intelligentsia – professions – zemstvo – zemstvo medicine – zemstvo physicians – zemstvo doctors – feldshers – midwives – physicians' assistants – social identity – consciousness – authority – power – conflict – violence – everyday life – tsarist Russia – imperial Russia – "Thieves" – "An Unpleasantness"

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“The physician you invite, but the feldsher you summon.”

“Врача пригласить, а фельдшера позвать.”

ANTON CHEKHOV, *Zapisnye knizhki*<sup>1</sup>

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Anton Chekhov's stories and plays provide a richly detailed portrait of Russian society at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. This article examines two of his early stories, both of which are set in the world of Russian rural medicine. The first, entitled “An Unpleasantness” (*Nepriiatnost'*) (1888), is perhaps the most detailed portrayal of the everyday workings of a zemstvo medical clinic that Chekhov ever attempted. The “unpleasantness” noted in the title is a conflict between a zemstvo physician and the feldsher or medical assistant with whom he works.<sup>2</sup> “Thieves” (*Vory*) (1890),<sup>3</sup> the second story, explores a zemstvo feldsher's sense of social identity and the profound transformation of his overall consciousness that occurs as a result of his experiences.

Unlike other works by Chekhov, these two stories have attracted relatively little scholarly attention. There are notable exceptions in this regard. Leonard A. Polakiewicz and Joseph L. Conrad have written insightful literary analyses of the stories,<sup>4</sup> and Vladimir Kataev grants these particular stories a significant place in his broader interpretation of Chekhov's work.<sup>5</sup> But these literary

1 Anton Chekhov, *Iz zapisnykh knizhek A. Chekhova* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1968), 88.

2 Chekhov wrote “An Unpleasantness” in the spring of 1888. It was published in *Novoe vremia* (No. 4404, June 3, 1888, p. 2) and (No. 4408, June 7, 1888, pp. 2–3). The story was originally published under the title “Zhiteiskaia meloch” (“An Everyday Trifle”). For the full text see A.P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v 30 tomakh, Sochineniia* (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), 7: 141–58. (Henceforth cited as Chekhov, PSSiP, *Sochineniia* or PSSiP, *Pis'ma*, with volume numbers).

3 Chekhov originally published “Thieves” in 1890 under the title “Cherty” (“Devils”). In subsequent editions, he changed the title and made small but important alterations in the text itself. For the full text see Chekhov, PSSiP, *Sochineniia*, 7: 311–26.

4 On “An Unpleasantness” see Leonard A. Polakiewicz, “‘An Unpleasantness’: a rare case of violent protest in Chekhov's works,” *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies*, vol. 23, nos. 1–2 (2010): 69–93; Joseph L. Conrad, “Unresolved Tension in Čexov's Stories, 1886–88,” *The Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Spring 1972): 55–64; and idem, “Sensuality in Čexov's Prose,” *The Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 24, no. 2 (Summer 1980): 103–117.

5 Vladimir Kataev, *If Only We Could Know! An Interpretation of Chekhov*, tr. and ed. by Harvey Pitcher (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 52–66 and passim.

studies are only marginally concerned with the historical reality of the medical world within which the stories take place. It is the relationship between these stories and that historical world that this article seeks to explore. Chekhov knew the medical world of rural Russia quite well. A physician himself, he had practiced briefly in a zemstvo hospital early in his career. He treated patients on his estate and kept up with events in the zemstvo medical world throughout his life. His stories, in addition to their aesthetic merit, are fascinating for the way in which they illuminate the human dimension of that world.<sup>6</sup>

Chekhov was an artist, not a sociologist or historian, but he was acutely aware of his characters' social status, their sense of identity, their relationship with others, and the ways in which others regarded them. He also had a pronounced fascination with the details of everyday life, particularly the power of minor conflicts and irritations to shape the attitudes, values, and overall consciousness of his characters. As an artist as well as keen observer of his own society, he understood that human relationships occur in a specific environment, and his works are rightly prized not only for his psychological insights into his characters but for the laconic artistry with which he captures that environment.<sup>7</sup>

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6 Kornei Chukovskii cites Chekhov's sister Maria Pavlovna's testimony that Chekhov treated more than a thousand peasants a year without payment during the 1890s on his estate at Melikhovo. Kornei Chukovskii, *O Chekhove: chelovek i master* (Moscow: Russkii put', 2007), 26. For excellent discussions of Chekhov's portrayals of zemstvo physicians see Nancy Mandelker Frieden, *Russian Physicians in an Era of Reform and Revolution, 1856–1905* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 51, 206–207; Louise McReynolds and Cathy Popkin, "The Objective Eye and the Common Good," in Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd, eds., *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution: 1881–1940* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 95–98. A stimulating recent analysis of Chekhov's portrayal of professionals, including physicians, is Michael C. Finke, *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2005), chapters 2 and 3.

7 For a pioneering work that uses Chekhov's works as a key to late imperial Russian society see W. H. Bruford, *Chekhov and His Russia: A Sociological Study* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1948). Bruford, whose chief specialty was German literature, knew Russian and retained an abiding interest in Chekhov. In 1957 he published a biographical study entitled simply *Chekhov* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1957), and his sociological study of 1948 was republished in 1971 by Routledge & Kegan Paul as part of the International Library of Sociology. Bruford himself worked at Bletchley Park during the Second World War. He stands as an example of the immense fascination that Chekhov has had for scholars whose primary field of study was outside of Russian literature. See Leonard Forster, "Walter Horace Bruford, 1894–1988," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 76 (1991): 383–394.

In each of these stories, the figure of the feldsher, or physician's assistant, either plays an important role in the story ("An Unpleasantness") or is the actual protagonist ("Thieves"). These are not the only Chekhov stories in which feldshers appear, but they contain his most detailed depiction of the roles that they played in the everyday operation of the zemstvo medical system, of their relationship to the physicians with whom they worked, and finally of their aspirations, discontents, and sense of their own identity.<sup>8</sup>

Russia's feldshers are figures whose identity and precise medical role are not widely understood in the West. There are a number of reasons for this. Most important, the German title "feldsher" means nothing to most non-Russian readers. Anticipating this, translators usually render the term either as "medic" or "assistant" or "orderly." Such generic renderings, however reasonable, do not convey a very clear picture of what kinds of people feldshers actually were. To Russians at the time, however, feldshers were familiar and readily identifiable figures who played a vital, if controversial, role in Russian rural medicine. When Chekhov mentioned them, he could assume that his Russian readers would know exactly who they were. Moreover, Chekhov himself had a particular interest in feldshers' identity and practice that we can trace to his days in medical school.

Within these two stories, our focus will be on the ways in which Chekhov treated the problem of social identity, particularly for feldshers, but also more broadly. Historically, social identity in Russia, to an overwhelming extent, had been prescribed by law. Even after the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, the state continued to ascribe rights, privileges, obligations, and limitations to a host of diverse social and ethnic groups. During the late nineteenth century, however, occupation began to displace earlier legal categories as the primary marker of social identity for professionals such as physicians or lawyers. In the medical sphere, this was true even for less prestigious paramedics such as feldshers and midwives. The expansion of the professions enhanced opportunities for social mobility, whether through the labor market or promotion in place. But it also generated conflict over status, rights, and place in the overall community. With time, members of professions began to organize in order to improve their overall professional standing.<sup>9</sup>

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8 Other stories in which feldshers have a prominent place include "Rothschild's Fiddle," "Ward No. 6," "Surgery," and "The Wife".

9 For perceptive analyses of the problem of social identity in imperial Russia, see Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, *Social Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1997); idem, *Structures of Society: Imperial Russia's "People of Various Ranks"* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1994); Gregory L. Freeze, "The *Soslovie*

Feldshers had a particularly uncertain and unstable sense of their own social identity during this period. The law strictly limited their rights as practitioners and made them wholly subordinate to a physician's authority. The almost total authority granted to physicians was subject to abuse, and the law said little about feldshers' rights at the workplace. Increasingly influenced by the egalitarian spirit that gripped the country in the later nineteenth century, feldshers would seek to attain greater professional rights and legal recognition of their labors.

By the late 1880s, when Chekhov wrote these stories, feldshers had begun to internalize a consciousness of their rights to greater personal and professional respect, whether because of their education, their service, or simply their status as human beings. This consciousness was coupled with a growing conviction that they could improve their overall social standing through professional organization and publicity, a conviction that gave rise to the emergence of a feldsher professional movement in the 1890s.<sup>10</sup>

Feldshers grounded their growing consciousness of rights in a mixture of democratic and meritocratic claims that often clashed with physicians' insistence upon their own professional authority and with older, patrimonial notions of discipline and justice that were still widespread among many *zemstvo* authorities. Such disparate estimates of social status and the respect that one was due could result in conflict and confusion on all sides. In their portrayal of the impact that social identity and the burdens of quotidian existence could have upon individual consciousness, these two stories are among the best that Chekhov ever wrote.

Why make an effort to locate these particular stories in the historical context of *zemstvo* medicine? As artistic works, the stories can certainly be read with profit without any reference to "real" social or historical circumstances. The narrative in these particular stories, however, is embedded unusually

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(Estate) Paradigm and Russian Social History," *American Historical Review* 91 (February 1986): 11–36; Michael R. Katz and William G. Wagner, "Introduction: Chernyshevsky, *What Is To Be Done?* and the Russian Intelligentsia," in Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What Is To Be Done?* trans. Michael R. Katz, annotated William G. Wagner (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 1–7; Leopold Haimson, "Civil War and the Problem of Social Identities in Early Twentieth-Century Russia," *Slavic Review* 47, 1 (Spring, 1988): 1–20; and the various essays in Edith W. Clowes, Samuel D. Kassow and James L. West, eds. *Between Tsar and People: Educated Society and the Quest for Public Identity in Late Imperial Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

10 See Samuel C. Ramer, "Professionalism and Politics: The Russian Feldsher Movement, 1891–1918," in Harley D. Balzer, ed., *Russia's Missing Middle Class: The Professions in Russian History* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996): 117–142.

deeply in the social and historical realities of the zemstvo medical world circa 1890. Grasping the accuracy with which Chekhov portrays these realities isn't essential to appreciate the stories. But an awareness of what those realities were, something educated readers in the Russia of Chekhov's time would have shared, has the potential to deepen that appreciation.

### Resolving Conflict in a Zemstvo Hospital: "An Unpleasantness"

Published in 1888, "An Unpleasantness" recounts the unfolding conflict between a physician in charge of a rural clinic and the feldsher who is his immediate assistant. A contemporary described the frequently contentious relationship between physicians and their feldshers as the "sore point of zemstvo medicine," so in placing this particular conflict at the heart of his story, Chekhov was addressing an issue that had a broad resonance among physicians, feldshers, and others interested in the zemstvo affairs.<sup>11</sup>

The story's protagonist is Dr. Grigorii Ovchinnikov, an unmarried zemstvo physician about thirty-five years old who runs a small rural hospital. Chekhov describes Ovchinnikov as someone "known to his comrades for his modest works on medical statistics and passionate concern with so-called 'social problems'".<sup>12</sup> In short, he was a dedicated, hardworking zemstvo physician who saw himself as part of a broader social as well as medical mission in Russia. The story makes it clear that he was also the kind of socially committed member of the Russian intelligentsia whom liberals (and certainly Chekhov) respected and even venerated for their labors. Chekhov also notes that he was "haggard and nervous," and his nervous disposition is an important factor in the story itself.

At the story's outset, Dr. Ovchinnikov is making morning rounds in his clinic. He is joined by his feldsher Mikhail Zakharovich Smirnovskii, whom Chekhov describes in colorful terms as "an elderly man with a puffy face, flat greasy hair and a ring in his ear."<sup>13</sup> These few words make it clear that, while

11 For a contemporary account that explores the endemic nature of this conflict between physicians and feldshers over many years see the anonymous paper "Feldshera i vrachi. Doklad, chitannyi 10-go i iulia 1903 g. v sobranii fel'dsherov i fel'dsherits Balashovskogo uezda," *Saratovskaia zemskaia nedelia* 8 (August 1903): 75–80.

12 Chekhov, PSSiP, *Sochineniia*, 7: 141. All translations from Chekhov's original are my own. Excellent English translations of both stories can be found in Anton Chekhov, *The Steppe and Other Stories*, translated with an introduction and notes by Ronald Hingley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

13 Chekhov, PSSiP, *Sochineniia*, 7: 141.

Smirnovskii and Dr. Ovchinnikov may work together, they belong to quite different social and cultural worlds. The good doctor immediately senses that his feldsher is hung over from a birthday party of the previous evening and is, indeed, straining to maintain a shaky control over his movements. The narrator tells us that Ovchinnikov didn't like his feldsher anyway (and had reasons for this), but found his demeanor particularly "hateful" on this morning. As Ovchinnikov asks feldsher Smirnovskii for scalpels and other materials, he becomes increasingly irritated by the feldsher's mistakes, slip-ups, and what he sees as his intolerable incompetence. Finally, he loses his patience and tells Smirnovskii to "go and sleep it off!" adding that "I don't want to talk with a drunk."<sup>14</sup>

Feldsher Smirnovskii responds that Ovchinnikov has no right to tell him what to do in his private life. To clinch his point he adds: "I'm serving, aren't I? What more do you want? Aren't I serving?"<sup>15</sup> The insolence of this self-righteous and wholly unrepentant response infuriates Ovchinnikov so much that – quite unexpectedly for himself – he hits Smirnovskii in the face with all his strength, knocking him down and leaving him sprawling in the aisle. The narrator proceeds to tell us just how good this felt initially, and how Ovchinnikov's first reaction was not simply one of pleasure, but of a strong desire to hit him again. His momentary sense of satisfaction is short-lived. He can see from the expressions of horror on the faces of the nurses in the room that his behavior has frightened them. More important, he knows that hitting a subordinate is not only against the rules, but something that violates his own sense of proper human and professional behavior.

Immediately following his confrontation with feldsher Smirnovskii, the distraught Dr. Ovchinnikov returns home to recover his equilibrium. Before recounting just how this incident played itself out, Chekhov informs us that he then returned to complete his rounds, lancing the abscesses on one patient's arm and performing surgery on a peasant woman's eye. Having done this, he proceeded to examine and treat forty-five ambulatory patients who were waiting to see him. Chekhov inserts this information into the story without fanfare, quietly reminding the reader of the exhausting labor that was part of Ovchinnikov's everyday routine.<sup>16</sup>

The remainder of the story examines just how this unpleasant incident will be resolved, not simply for Ovchinnikov, but for feldsher Smirnovskii, and also for the hospital and zemstvo authorities in this district. How, in short, does one

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14 Ibid., 143.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., 146–48.

go about repairing such a breach in relations at the workplace? Chekhov has a delightful time riffing through the variety of resolutions that Ovchinnikov contemplates. The doctor vacillates between his desire to see the feldsher punished, preferably fired, and his awareness that feldsher Smirnovskii's shortcomings in no way excuse his own behavior. His meditations and his final course of action reveal him to be indecisive and almost fantastically impractical. Initially, he goes down the path of self-justification, enumerating the many reasons why feldsher Smirnovskii deserved such a thrashing. A second option was to demand that the zemstvo board either dismiss Smirnovskii or accept his own resignation. Resigning has particular appeal, holding out the possibility for a professional martyrdom that he imagined would elicit a sympathetic stir in the pages of the physicians' newspaper *Vrach*.<sup>17</sup>

These initial fantasies make it clear that Ovchinnikov is genuinely confused about how to proceed. He is at once ashamed of his own actions and tormented by an overall environment that he perceives as either indifferent or outright hostile to his best professional efforts. He is doubly furious with feldsher Smirnovskii, in his words, for "forcing me to hit someone for the first time in my life."<sup>18</sup> At the same time, he clearly recognizes that he is in the wrong. Smirnovskii, he muses, may be "a bad man and detrimental to medical practice .... Still, nothing can justify what I did. I used my position as the stronger party here." What's worse, he notes, "I struck him in front of people who consider me an authority, and thus set a repulsive example for them."<sup>19</sup>

But what, then, should he do? Ovchinnikov, as Chekhov portrays him, is a fundamentally decent man, so he's haunted by the sense that he must somehow make amends. An obvious possibility would be to apologize to feldsher Smirnovskii, but Ovchinnikov rejects this immediately on two grounds: first, that Smirnovskii would attribute such an apology to fear or cowardice on his part, and second, that such an apology would undermine discipline within the hospital. Next he contemplates inviting the zemstvo board to resolve the dispute. But he quickly rejects this course of action since it would bring the zemstvo board into the internal administration of the hospital, something he is anxious to avoid. (Such a concern to preserve the physician's exclusive authority within his hospital, we should note, was widely shared among zemstvo physicians). A third possibility that Ovchinnikov considers is to invite Smirnovskii to sue him in court. At this moment in the story, a subdued Smirnovskii actually appears at Ovchinnikov's house and offers to apologize. Rather than accept

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17 Ibid., 146.

18 Ibid., 147.

19 Ibid., 148.



this apology and move on, Ovchinnikov urges Smirnovskii to bring suit against him for his action, which will guarantee that “one of us – I or you – must leave!” Even as he makes this proposal, he recognizes how ridiculous his behavior is in worldly terms: “My God,” he says to himself, “I’m not saying what I should.... How stupid, how stupid!”<sup>20</sup>

Ovchinnikov’s invitation to sue brings all of feldsher Smirnovskii’s animosity toward him to the surface, and his response is instantaneous: “And what are you thinking? That I won’t sue? Oh, I’ll sue...You don’t have the right to hit someone. And you should be ashamed of yourself! Only drunken peasants get into fistfights, but you’re an educated man.”<sup>21</sup> Smirnovskii’s manner as well as his words makes it clear that he is aware of his rights as well as of the limits of acceptable behavior in professional life.

Feldsher Smirnovskii does bring a lawsuit against Dr. Ovchinnikov. Instead of complaining of being beaten, however, he files what is, in effect, a political denunciation, alleging falsely that “several times in his presence the doctor had disparaged the zemstvo board and its chairman, that the doctor’s approach to treating patients was flawed, that he didn’t visit outlying posts in the district on the proper schedule, and so on.”<sup>22</sup> A week later, Dr. Ovchinnikov is summoned to the court.

The remainder of the story describes how the conflict between Ovchinnikov and Smirnovskii was finally settled. On the date of the scheduled court hearing, Ovchinnikov meets on a friendly and quite informal footing with the Judge, a man with the Gogolian name of Aleksandr Arkhipovich. Later, he also meets with Lev Trofimovich, the head of the zemstvo board, who politely chews him out for not having asked for help at the very outset. “Why didn’t you notify me?” he asks. “If you’d had any feelings for me you’d have driven over to see me and spoken informally, as a friend. ‘My dear Lev Trofimych, such and such has happened...the story’s one of this sort and so on...’”

I’d have settled everything for you in a second and there would have been no need for this scandal... That fool, who seems to have gone crazy, is gallivanting around the district spreading slander and gossiping with village women while you, it’s a shame to say, have stirred up the devil knows what, if you’ll pardon my expression, by forcing that fool to sue you! It’s a shame, a pure shame! Everyone asks me what’s going on and how, and I – the chairman! – don’t know anything about what’s going on with you over

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20 Ibid., 150.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 151.

there. You don't have any need for me! I'm very, very grateful to you, Grigorii Ivanych!"<sup>23</sup>

At this point, the chairman of the zemstvo board summons feldsher Smirnovskii and simply orders him to apologize to Dr. Ovchinnikov, a step that leads Ovchinnikov to flee the room in disgust at the entire proceeding. "There, you see," the chairman continued: "The doctor doesn't want to accept your apologies! He wants you to show your repentance not in words, but in deeds. Do you promise that from this day on you will obey his instructions and lead a sober life?" When Smirnovskii agrees, the chairman dismisses him with a warning to "watch yourself, or God preserve you!" and the feldsher departs.<sup>24</sup>

The chairman is quite satisfied that he has settled this matter without a trial. "Blessed are the peacemakers," he remarks before asking for a second vodka and something to eat. For his part, however, Ovchinnikov is horrified by this authoritarian way of resolving matters and tells the chairman so in no uncertain terms: "This...is a comedy! It's disgusting! I can't stand it. Better to hold twenty trials than settle things in this vaudeville fashion. No, I can't stand it!"<sup>25</sup>

The chairman, clearly irritated by this rebuke, offers to fire Smirnovskii if that's what Ovchinnikov wants. For the chairman as well as the judge, this is a straightforward case of maintaining order and shoring up administrative authority. They are men of the old school, so to speak, who regard the arbitrary exercise of paternalistic authority as an essential dimension of public life. Ovchinnikov doesn't know what he wants, but he recoils from this older way of doing things. For their part, neither the judge nor the chairman can fully comprehend why Dr. Ovchinnikov is so upset. The judge puts this plainly in a convoluted language that has a hugely comic effect: "Dear heart," he says,

to some extent I don't understand you, so to speak. After all, you're the guilty party in this incident! Smacking people in the face at the end of the nineteenth century – this is, in some fashion, if you like, not quite the thing... He's a scoundrel (*merzavets*), but you must agree that you also acted imprudently.<sup>26</sup>

To this, of course, Dr. Ovchinnikov has no reply. The authoritarian resolution that came so easily to his zemstvo employers violates his own liberal values.

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23 Ibid., 156–57.

24 Ibid., 157.

25 Ibid., 158.

26 Ibid.

But he recognizes that his own impractical and indecisive behavior has only magnified the intractability of the original incident. Overwhelmed by the banality and stupidity of everything that had taken place, he was also ashamed of himself and the role he had played.

He was ashamed for involving outsiders in his personal matter, ashamed of the words he had spoken to these people, ashamed of the vodka that he had drunk from the habit of drinking and living in vain, ashamed of his uncomprehending, shallow mind.<sup>27</sup>

At the story's conclusion, Dr. Ovchinnikov returns to his clinic and resumes his rounds with feldsher Smirnovskii, the midwife and nurses beside him. On the surface, at least, they engage in a "historical forgetting" for the sake of getting on with life. Frustration and animosity remain, but "all pretended that nothing had happened and that everything was fine."<sup>28</sup> The entire experience, however, has only deepened the despair with which Dr. Ovchinnikov goes about his tasks. The narrator tells us that, despite his external demeanor, "one thought kept stirring in his brain: 'stupid, stupid, stupid...'"<sup>29</sup>

### Dr. Ovchinnikov's Discontents with the Zemstvo

Dr. Ovchinnikov's conflict with feldsher Smirnovskii, as Chekhov presents it, is only one of a long list of indignities that he sees himself as enduring in his work as a zemstvo physician. He is frustrated by the overall conditions in his clinic, something he attributes to the sloppy work of all his assistants, from the feldsher and midwife to his nurses. As he looks around his clinic, for example, the narrator tells us that "it struck him that the ward had not been cleaned up and that everything was in a mess, that nothing that needed to be done had been done." His response to this disorder is more than simply irritation: "He wanted to tear off his white apron, scream, give everything up, spit on it all and leave."<sup>30</sup>

But Ovchinnikov's more generalized anger has sources other than his assistants. He is convinced that the zemstvo board and its chairman appreciate neither his learning nor his arduous service. More important, he doesn't sense

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 142.

that he has either the power or the recognition that his medical expertise and authority should convey. He believes – wrongly as it turns out, but sincerely – that even feldsher Smirnovskii's aunt has more influence with his zemstvo bosses than he does, because she works as a nanny for the chairman of the zemstvo board. This is demeaning, and it grates on him. He knows very well that hitting Smirnovskii was wrong, but he's nonetheless furious that he must work with such people, and in such conditions.

Later, in a conversation with the Judge, Ovchinnikov launches into an angry and quite detailed enumeration of the grievances he nourishes against his zemstvo employers. "What can I do," he asks, "if the zemstvo doesn't care a whit for us doctors, if it trips us up at every step? The devil take them, I don't want to work for them, and that's that! I don't want to!"<sup>31</sup> When the Judge insists that he's overstating things, it triggers an even more passionate litany of charges against various zemstvo figures:

The Marshal of the Nobility tries with all his might to prove that we're all nihilists, he spies on us and demeans us like his clerks. What right does he have to come into the hospital when I'm not there and interrogate the nurses and the patients? Isn't that insulting?...I work from morning till night, I get no rest, I'm needed here more than all these idiots, sanctimonious moralists, reformers and other such clowns put together. I've lost my health at work, and instead of gratitude they begrudge me my piece of bread. I thank you most humbly! And everyone thinks he has the right to poke his nose into other people's business, to instruct them and control them! Your Kamchatskii, who's a member of the zemstvo board, reprimanded doctors at the zemstvo assembly for using up a lot of potassium iodide and recommended that we be careful in using cocaine! What does he understand, I ask you? What business is it of his? Why doesn't he teach you how to serve as a judge?<sup>32</sup>

I quote this diatribe at length because it reflects so precisely the tension that existed between many zemstvo physicians and their zemstvo employers. The history of zemstvo medicine, particularly during its earliest decades (the late 1860s through the 1880s), is replete with instances of conflict between zemstvo physicians and the supervisory control of those who had hired them.<sup>33</sup>

31 Ibid., 153.

32 Ibid., 153–54. On the identity of Marshals of the Nobility see G. M. Hamburg, "Portrait of an Elite: Russian Marshals of the Nobility, 1861–1917," *Slavic Review*, vol. 40, no. 4 (December 1981): 585–602.

33 See examples in Frieden, *Russian Physicians*, 209.

The roots of this conflict, where it existed, usually involved some version of the complaint that Ovchinnikov registers. Physicians argued that their medical training should give them the authority to arrange their clinics and services as they saw best, given their limited numbers and resources. Zemstvo boards and delegates conceded that specific medical treatments were the exclusive province of physicians. But they were not willing to leave the organization of health-care delivery entirely up to physicians. They argued here that decisions concerning budgets and the deployment of personnel were not matters of medical expertise, but rather practical public matters in which elected representatives should have the final voice.

Physicians – like other members of the zemstvo’s “third element” – tended to be more liberal in their political views than most of their zemstvo employers. As Nancy Frieden has demonstrated, however, “only a small segment of the profession allied itself with the radical intelligentsia.”<sup>34</sup> Most zemstvo physicians were indeed content to work for incremental improvements in the zemstvo’s medical framework. But the very intensity of their professional commitment to public health and sanitary measures could lead more conservative elements in zemstvo assemblies and boards to view them with suspicion. The actual relationship between physicians and zemstvo authorities varied depending upon the individuals involved, but tension and conflict over who was the ultimate authority in matters of zemstvo medicine were common problems in zemstvo medical administration.<sup>35</sup> In this respect, Chekhov’s portrayal of Dr. Ovchinnikov accurately captures a broader social reality.

The passionate complaints about his zemstvo superiors that Ovchinnikov shares with the Judge are particularly revealing because of the frankness with which both Ovchinnikov and the Justice speak their minds.<sup>36</sup> One might

34 Ibid., 13. There were some genuine revolutionaries among zemstvo physicians. See Michael Melancon’s discussion of the Socialist Revolutionary physician Vladimir Chenykaev’s revolutionary work in Saratov province in “Athens or Babylon? The Birth of the Socialist Revolutionary and Social Democratic Parties in Saratov, 1890–1905” in Rex A. Wade and Scott J. Seregny, eds., *Politics and Society in Provincial Russia, Saratov, 1590–1917* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1989), 73–112.

35 For excellent discussions of zemstvo professionals and political engagement see Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, *Social Identity*, 86–96; N.M. Pirumova, *Zemskoe liberal’noe dvizhenie: Sotsial’nye korni i evoliutsiia do nachala XX veka* (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), chap. 3: “Zemskie glasnye i ‘tretii element’”; and idem, *Zemskaiia intelligentsia i ee rol’ v obshchestvennoi bor’be do nachala XX veka* (Moscow: Nauka, 1986), chap. 2.

36 On the identity and historical role that Justices of the Peace (*mirovye sud’i*) played in Russia during this period see Thomas S. Pearson, “Russian Law and Rural Justice: Activity

assume that Ovchinnikov would welcome the chance to share his complaints with a sympathetic older official. The Judge is well disposed toward Ovchinnikov, sympathizes with his anger and seeks to calm him down. But the enormous disparity in their values and perceptions makes that impossible. Responding to Ovchinnikov's outrage at the ways in which a member of the zemstvo board has tried to micromanage physicians' practice, the Judge urges him not to take such a "boor and a lackey" seriously. This stab at empathy elicits an even angrier response from Ovchinnikov:

He's a boor and a lackey, but it was you who elected this windbag to the zemstvo board and allow him to stick his nose into everything. Here I can see you're smiling! You think these are all details, trifles, but you have to understand that there are so many of these details that one's entire life consists of them, just as a mountain consists of grains of sand! I can't go on! I don't have the strength, Aleksandr Arkhipych! A little bit more, I assure you, and I won't just be punching faces, I'll be shooting at people! You have to understand, I have nerves, not wires. I'm a human being just like you are...<sup>37</sup>

Ovchinnikov's phraseology here is at once comical and suffused with despair. But we should pay close attention to what he actually says. He doesn't say that the burden of everyday indignities and frustrations will drive him to suicide, of which there was a high rate among physicians.<sup>38</sup> Rather he threatens to escalate the violence of his own earlier response: to go beyond "punching people in the face" to shooting them. We don't have to take this literally, perhaps, but Chekhov was a person who chose his words carefully. At the very least, he

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and Problems of the Russian Justices of the Peace, 1865–1889," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, Neue Folge Bd. 32, H. 1 (1984): 52–71; Joan Neuberger, "Popular Legal Cultures: The St. Petersburg *Mirovoi Sud*," in Ben Eklof, John Bushnell, and Larissa Zakharova, eds., *Russia's Great Reforms, 1855–1881* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 231–246; and Mikhail Vostryshev, *Povsednevnaia zhizn' Rossii v zasedaniakh mirovogo suda i revtribunala, 1860–1920-e gody* (Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 2004). Justices of the Peace were replaced by Land Captains (*zemskie nachal'niki*) in 1889 everywhere except St. Petersburg, Moscow, and major provincial cities, only to be restored in 1912 (Pearson, 53).

37 Chekhov, PSSiP, *Sochineniia*, 7: 154.

38 Estimates vary, but all indicate that the rate of suicide among zemstvo physicians was more than twice as high as that among educated Russians more broadly. Between 1889 and 1895, the approximate dates in which these stories are set, fifty zemstvo physicians committed suicide. The reasons most frequently cited for this focus on the physical as well as psychic burdens of zemstvo service. For a detailed discussion of this problem see Frieden, *Russian Physicians*, 224.

uses this phrase to convey just how desperate the “haggard and nervous” Ovchinnikov felt.

Chekhov originally entitled this story “An Everyday Trifle,” (*Zhiteiskaia meloch*), which suggests that his emphasis upon the cumulative power of everyday aggravations was neither a minor nor purely incidental dimension of the story. Here again, Chekhov’s emphasis upon the impact of such everyday conflicts echoes the complaints that physicians and other members of the “third element” regularly registered about their experiences serving in the *zemstvo*. Ovchinnikov’s neurotic response to his various indignities has an obvious comic dimension. But like most of Chekhov’s comedy, it also captures a despair that he knew was quite serious.

### Mikhail Smirnovskii: The Social Identity of a *Zemstvo* Feldsher

The chief protagonist of “An Unpleasantness” is clearly Dr. Ovchinnikov. The primary narrative of the story follows the ways in which he seeks to resolve his conflict with feldsher Smirnovskii, and we see the unfolding events through his eyes. But for the historian, at least, the story contains equally suggestive insights into the social identity and overall attitudes and abilities not only of feldsher Smirnovskii, but of a broader contingent of feldshers in rural medical practice.

In an effort to justify hitting feldsher Smirnovskii, at least to himself, Dr. Ovchinnikov enumerates what he sees as the feldsher’s shortcomings in detail:

The feldsher [Smirnovskii SCR] is poorly disciplined, knows little and completely misunderstands everything that he does know. He’s drunken, insolent, and slovenly, takes bribes from patients and sells the *zemstvo*’s medicines under the table. Everyone also knows that he engages in private practice, treating young townfolk for secret illnesses [i.e., venereal diseases SCR], and uses some concoctions of his own making in doing so. It would be bad enough if he were simply a charlatan, of which there are many. But this is a charlatan with convictions, a charlatan who is secretly protesting! He cups and bleeds ambulatory patients without telling the doctor. He assists at operations with unwashed hands, digging around in wounds with a probe that’s always dirty – all of which is enough to make clear just how profoundly and openly he despises the medicine of doctors with its scholarly learning and pedantry.<sup>39</sup>

39 Chekhov, PSSiP, *Sochineniia*, 7: 144–45.

In this survey of feldsher Smirnovskii's shortcomings, as Dr. Ovchinnikov sees them, Chekhov has provided a representative catalog of the complaints zemstvo physicians had made about feldshers since the very inception of zemstvo medicine in the 1860s. Like many zemstvo physicians, Ovchinnikov began by citing defects in Smirnovskii's character: he was "undisciplined," "drunken," "insolent," and "slovenly." Beyond this, his taking of bribes and selling of zemstvo medicines were testimony to his dishonesty and abuse of his position. Such denigration of feldshers' moral character was common fare in professional publications to which physicians contributed.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to these character flaws, Ovchinnikov describes Smirnovskii's manifold shortcomings as a medical practitioner. These charges, once again, were almost formulaic in the books and articles that zemstvo physicians published about their practice. They had a special resonance in discussions of zemstvo medicine that it's important to recall here. Since feldshers' practice, by law, was restricted to carrying out physicians' orders, any independent feldsher practice (particularly opening up any private practice on the side) violated the letter as well as the spirit of zemstvo medical organization. Failure to observe sanitary precautions by washing one's hands and using sterilized equipment was bound to undermine whatever chances zemstvo surgeries had to be successful.

The most damning of Ovchinnikov's accusations is that feldsher Smirnovskii not only didn't understand the basic principles underlying modern medicine, but that he actually despised such medicine "with its scholarly learning and pedantry." Zemstvo medicine's very mandate was to provide modern medical care for the peasantry. This required that physicians and their assistants persuade peasants that the modern medicine they provided was superior to that practiced by the variety of traditional healers who still enjoyed considerable authority in the countryside. Feldshers, many of whom came from the peasantry, could potentially serve as links "between science and the village," but they could only do so if they were actually representatives of modern medicine. If they themselves did not understand or believe in modern medicine, as Dr. Ovchinnikov alleges here concerning feldsher Smirnovskii, then they would

40 Chekhov himself would echo physicians' widespread disparagement of feldshers in Act 2 of *Uncle Vanya*. Here the quite decent Dr. Astrov, in mocking his feldsher's pronunciation, mentions in a throwaway line that he is a "terrible rogue" (*moshennik strashnyi*). Chekhov, PSSiP, *Sochineniia*, 13: 82. On physicians' persistent demeaning of feldshers' moral qualities as well as qualifications in their various publications see Ramer, "Who Was the Russian Feldsher," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. 50, no. 2 (Summer 1976): 217–219.



only undermine physicians' efforts to acquire popular medical authority for their practice.

### Judge Aleksandr Arkhipovich on Feldshers and "Middling People"

Let us return to Ovchinnikov's conversation with the Judge about how to resolve his conflict with feldsher Smirnovskii. Initially, the Judge urges him simply to fire the feldsher. Ovchinnikov, however, doesn't think that he has the power to do this and is shocked that the Justice believes that he does.<sup>41</sup> Later, however, he advances a quite different humanitarian reason why he can't fire him: "How can I fire him and deprive him of his crust of bread," he asks, "when I know he's a man with a family and hungry. Where would he go with his family?"<sup>42</sup>

The Judge then changes his mind and suggests that dismissing Smirnovskii would be a mistake anyway, since "someone just like him, or even worse, will take his place. You could go through a hundred such people and not find someone that's any good... They're all scoundrels (*merzavtsy*)...."<sup>43</sup> The Judge buttresses this sweeping generalization with an equally sweeping quasi-sociological analysis:

We have to make our peace with this evil. I must tell you that at present one can find honest and sober workers you can depend upon only among the intelligentsia and the peasants, that is, at these two extremes of society – and only among them. You might find a really decent doctor, an outstanding teacher, a thoroughly honest ploughman or blacksmith, so to speak. But the middling people (*srednie liudi*), that is, if one can use the expression, people who have left the peasantry but not yet arrived at intelligentsia status, constitute an unreliable element. It's therefore quite difficult to find an honest and sober feldsher, clerk, farm bailiff and so on. Extremely difficult!.... These are people without any sort of moral discipline, not to mention principles, so to speak."<sup>44</sup>

41 It was the chairman of the zemstvo board, not a physician, who had the authority to dismiss a feldsher. The zemstvo board would usually ratify a physician's recommendation for such dismissal, but this wasn't automatic.

42 Chekhov, PSSiP, *Sochineniia*, 7: 155.

43 Ibid., 154. No English translation of which I'm aware does justice to the Russian word "*merzavets*."

44 Ibid., 154–55. There is a rich and suggestive historical literature on the "middling groups" in Russian society that the Judge so roundly criticizes here. See Elise Kimerling

The Judge clearly intended his musings on the virtually universal “unreliability” of feldshers and other “middling people” as a gesture of solidarity with the beleaguered Ovchinnikov, and the reader might anticipate that Ovchinnikov would welcome this. Instead, Ovchinnikov turns the discussion in a quite different direction. “The middling person (*srednii chelovek*), as you call him, is unreliable,” he acknowledges.

We fire him, we curse him, we hit him in the face, but we also need to see the world from his vantage point. He’s neither peasant nor master, neither fish nor fowl. His past is bitter, in the present he has only 25 rubles a month, a hungry family and a subordinate position, while in the future he has the same 25 rubles and dependent position even if he serves for a hundred years. He has neither education nor property, he has no time to read and go to church, and he doesn’t hear us because we don’t let him get near us. Thus he lives from day to day till death itself without hope for anything better, eating half-starved, and fearful that at any moment he may be driven out of his official apartment, not knowing where to put his children. Well, tell me how, here, can one not drink, or steal? Where does one get principles here?<sup>45</sup>

Ovchinnikov’s response to the judge’s musings is noteworthy in several respects. The first is the stress he places upon empathy. He doesn’t argue that the Judge’s allegations are too sweeping, or untrue. Instead, he insists that we

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Wirtschafter, *Social Identity*, chapter 3; essays in Samuel D. Kassow, James L. West, and Edith W. Clowes, eds., *Between Tsar and People*, particularly Kassow, West, and Clowes, “The Problem of the Middle in Later Imperial Russian Society,” (pp. 3–15); Charles E. Timberlake, “The Zemstvo and the Development of a Russian Middle Class,” (pp. 164–182); Harley Balzer, “The Problem of Professions in Imperial Russia,” (pp. 183–198); and Alfred J. Rieber, “The Sedimentary Society,” (pp. 343–366). Also Timberlake, “The Middle Classes in Late Tsarist Russia,” in M. L. Bush, ed., *Social Orders & Social Classes in Europe Since 1500: Studies in Social Stratification* (London and New York: Longman, 1992), 86–113; and the various articles in Harley D. Balzer, ed., *Russia’s Missing Middle Class*.

- 45 Chekhov, PSSiP, *Sochineniia*, 7: 155. Chekhov’s story “In the Cart” (*Na podvoide*) (1897) echoes Ovchinnikov’s dark portrayal of the lives of “middling people”, including feldshers: “Teachers, poorly paid doctors, and feldshers, given their enormous labor, don’t even have the comfort of thinking that they are serving an ideal or the people, since their heads are always crammed with thoughts of their daily bread, of wood to heat their houses, of bad roads, of illnesses. It’s a life that’s difficult and dull, and only silent, draught horses like this Maria Vasil’evna can stand it for long; the same lively, nervous, impressionable people who talked about their calling, about serving an ideal, soon grew weary and gave it up.” Chekhov, PSSiP, *Sochineniia*, 9: 339.

must seek to understand why they are accurate, at least in general. To do so, he urges, we must try to see the world from the point of view of these “middling people.” The qualities of empathy and understanding thus take precedence over judgment or condemnation in his response.

In describing a feldsher’s position, he does not begin by enumerating the feldsher’s various burdens, although this will follow, but rather with an almost epigrammatic description of his indeterminate “middling” social identity: “He’s neither peasant nor master, neither fish nor fowl.” From here he proceeds to enumerate the multiple sources of the feldsher’s everyday suffering: his salary of twenty-five rubles a month, his subservient professional position, his almost total dependency upon his superiors, and the total absence of any hope for his social or professional advancement.

Ovchinnikov’s catalog of the feldsher’s various woes is historically quite precise: salaries varied depending upon where a feldsher served, but averaged about twenty-five rubles a month in 1890. (The salary of zemstvo physicians also varied, but averaged about one hundred rubles a month at that time).<sup>46</sup> Feldshers were legally subordinate to physicians; they had little or no opportunity for upward social mobility; practical considerations and the requirement of a gymnasium diploma made it virtually impossible for them to enter the medical faculty.

Ovchinnikov rightly noted that feldshers lived close to subsistence, and therefore feared dismissal. He also notes, significantly, that “he [the feldsher] doesn’t hear us because we don’t let him get near us.” Here Ovchinnikov acknowledges that professional hierarchy almost inevitably entails social discrimination. His observation echoes widespread feldsher complaints that physicians made little or no attempt to educate them on the job and tended to hold them at arm’s length. Given these realities, he concluded, “How can one not drink, or steal? Where does one get principles here?”

Such emphasis upon the importance of empathy and understanding is all the more persuasive because it comes from Ovchinnikov, who is genuinely hostile to feldsher Smirnovskii. We can laugh at Ovchinnikov’s awkward efforts to mend the breach that his own behavior has provoked. But what’s more startling, in the end, is his ability to look beyond his own anger to see the existential dilemma not only of his feldsher, but of feldshers and “middling people” in general. This required not only empathy on his part, but also the predisposition as well as capacity to see such conflicts as manifestations of something beyond individual flaws or defects.

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46 Frieden, *Russian Physicians*, 213–221.

Ovchinnikov's disagreement with the Judge conveys a vital dimension of Ovchinnikov's own identity that his anger and impractical responses have tended to mask. At the core of his identity, beyond his medical training and professional dedication, there is his conscious self-identification as a member of the Russian intelligentsia. For Chekhov, certain traits were indispensable to any meaningful definition of intelligentsia status. None was more important in this regard than empathy – the capacity to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. And Ovchinnikov, regardless of his nervous and comically impractical character, has this.<sup>47</sup>

One could argue that there is no clear resolution to the conflict at the heart of this story. But Chekhov's point seems to be that, in the short run at least, the enormous frustrations of everyday life – including periodic conflicts with a feldsher such as Smirnovskii – could not be solved within the zemstvo medical system. Certainly there was no immediate path to resolving these kinds of conflicts and aggravations that would have satisfied Dr. Ovchinnikov. Implicitly, at least, he always has before him the image of a well-run clinic, something that he had perhaps experienced while training in Moscow, or possibly even Western Europe. Measured against this ideal, his own hospital – despite his best efforts – appears as an unacceptably flawed compromise. At the time of the story, there was not as yet a body of more skilled, knowledgeable, and conscientious practitioners who might replace massively flawed feldshers such as Smirnovskii. For zemstvo medicine to achieve this standard would require years, even decades. Chekhov's decision not to imagine any more immediate resolution within the story reflects his commitment to a “muddling through” that required patience as well as persistent effort.

### Zemstvo Medicine and the Feldsher: A Brief Historical Excursion

A brief discussion of zemstvo's medical system and the role that feldshers played within it may be useful here. The zemstvo reform of 1864 created new elected institutions of self-government at the provincial and district level in the 34 provinces of European Russia. The reform placed the responsibility for public health

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47 For an analysis of Chekhov and intelligentsia values see Svetlana Evdokimova, “An Intelligent in Everyday Life: Chekhov on the Ethics and Aesthetics of Behavior,” in Robert Bird, Lazar Fleishman and Fedor B. Poljakov, eds. *Sankirtos: Studies in Russian and East European Literature, Society and Culture: In Honor of Tomas Venclova*, vol. 3 (Russian Culture in Europe) (Frankfort am Main: Peter Lang: Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2008): 140–160.

and medical care on the provincial as well as district zemstvos, but the primary burden for providing rural medicine fell upon the district. It was the zemstvo at the district level that hired and supervised the majority of zemstvo physicians, assigning them either to the hospital in the district capital or more commonly to rural hospitals or clinics set up around the district. The zemstvo also inherited the various medical institutions and personnel previously run by earlier urban and rural administrations, but the reform itself did not spell out just how zemstvo assemblies should organize their medical services.<sup>48</sup>

Zemstvo medical programs began to be implemented in earnest only in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Although generous in funding public health, these zemstvos' overall budgets were quite limited, so the number of physicians actually practicing in rural Russia was extremely small. As of 1870, for example, there were only 756 zemstvo physicians in the thirty-four European provinces in which the zemstvo had been introduced. This number grew to 1,196 by 1880, and by 1890 (roughly Dr. Ovchinnikov's time) there were still only 1,818 physicians employed in zemstvo employ.<sup>49</sup> By 1910, this number was something over 3,000, but this was still a small proportion of the roughly 25,000 civilian physicians in the Empire at large.<sup>50</sup> In assessing the influence of zemstvo medicine upon the Russian medical profession, it's important to recall Nancy Frieden's point that "in addition to the 15 to 20 percent of the profession working in the zemstvos at any given time, from one-third to one-half had some contacts with zemstvo medicine."<sup>51</sup>

48 B.B. Veselovskii, *Istoriia zemstvo za sorok let*, 4 vols. (SPb.: Izd-vo O.N. Popovoi, 1909–1911), 1: 267–434; E. A. Osipov, P.I. Kurkin, and P.I. Popov, *Russkaia zemskaia meditsina: obzor razvitiia meditsiny voobshche i ot del'no v Moskovskoi gubernii s kratkim statisticheskim otchetom strany i ee sanitarnogo sostoianiia* (Moscow, 1899); Frieden, *Russian Physicians*, chaps. 3 and 4; Ramer, "The Zemstvo and Public Health," in Terence Emmons and Wayne S. Vucinich, eds., *The Zemstvo in Russia: An experiment in local self-government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 279–314; John F. Hutchinson, *Politics and Public Health in Revolutionary Russia, 1890–1918* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); M.B. Mirskii, *Meditsina Rossii XVI–XIX vekov* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1996), 301–341; Galina Ulianova, "Zdravookhranenie i meditsina," in A. N. Sakharov et al, eds., *Rossiiia v nachale XX veka* (Moscow: Novyi khronograf, 2002), 624–651; L.A. Zhukova, "Zemskaia meditsina v Rossii v kontse 60-kh-80-kh godakh XIX veka," in A.P. Korelin, et al., eds., *Zemskoe samoupravlenie v Rossii, 1864–1918*, 2 vols.. (Moscow, "Nauka," 2005), 1: 399–420; idem, "Zemskaia meditsina," in Korelin, et al, eds., *Zemskoe samoupravlenie*, 2: 86–116.

49 For the most detailed information on the growth in the numbers of physicians in the Russian empire see Frieden, *Russian Physicians*, 323.

50 Z.G. Frenkel', *Ocherki zemskogo vrachebno-sanitarnogo dela* (St. Petersburg, 1913), 121, 125.

51 Frieden, *Russian Physicians*, 126.

Given the limited numbers of physicians practicing at the district level in roughly 350 districts, it was inevitable that feldshers would play a vital role in the actual delivery of rural medical care. Some, like feldsher Smirnovskii, worked alongside a physician in a district hospital. But many were assigned to remote feldsher ambulatory clinics, where a district physician would visit them periodically. Feldshers at these remote clinics treated patients without a physician's oversight, something that the law actually prohibited, but which zemstvos excused on the grounds of necessity. As of 1890, there were 2,800 independent feldsher stations across zemstvo districts; there were still 2,620 of such independent stations as of 1910.<sup>52</sup> Such independent practice, known as "feldsherism," generated a contentious debate throughout the last years of the tsarist regime. Neither of the stories under discussion here involved a feldsher in independent practice, so the stories are silent on the issue of "feldsherism".

During the 1860s and 1870s, virtually all feldshers in zemstvo practice were so-called "*rotnye*" or "company" feldshers who had received their medical training as part of their military service. Others were orphans who had graduated from the feldsher schools attached to the Foundling Homes in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Most came from the peasantry and were culturally only slightly better educated than the peasants whom they treated. Overall, they had quite disparate degrees of training and skill. Contemporary physicians' reports suggest that many of them were quite competent as assistants working directly under a physician's supervision. The same reports describe others as chronic alcoholics who were ill-suited for any medical tasks.

Beginning in the late 1860s, provincial zemstvos recognized that their medical mission required that they train a corps of better qualified feldshers for rural service. Numerous zemstvos therefore established schools for feldshers and midwives with courses of training that lasted three to four years. Zemstvos made a conscious effort to recruit students from the ranks of the peasantry on the grounds that they had a natural cultural tie to the peasants they would treat, could speak their language, and were less likely to abandon the countryside for the city. Such feldsher students were recruited for these schools while in their teens. Graduates of these zemstvo feldsher schools became known as "*shkol'nye*" or "schooled" feldshers. Where possible, zemstvos preferred to hire feldshers and midwives who had graduated from such zemstvo schools for feldshers and midwives.

By 1890, there were over fifteen thousand feldshers serving in various capacities in the Russian empire. Of these, over seven thousand worked for the zemstvo: roughly 2,800 worked at hospitals in urban areas; about 4,500 held posts

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52 Frenkel', 121, 125. For early debates over such "feldsherism" see Veselovskii, 1: 336–355.

in the countryside. Feldshers in actual rural practice thus outnumbered physicians by a ratio of roughly three to one.<sup>53</sup> “*Rotnye*” feldshers still constituted the majority of those serving feldshers. Most of the feldshers portrayed in Chekhov’s stories – and certainly those under discussion here – were from the ranks of these older, “*rotnye*” feldshers. Chekhov had no need to mention this in the stories themselves, since the rivalry between “*rotnye*” and “*shkol’nye*” feldshers had no great significance in the 1880s, and the distinction was one that had little meaning for anyone not involved in the shaping of rural medicine.<sup>54</sup>

“*Rotnye*” feldshers would continue to play an important role in zemstvo medicine throughout the imperial period, and were a particularly large proportion of practicing feldshers in the late 1880s.<sup>55</sup> Over time, however, it was the character of these “*rotnye*” feldshers that transformed the very title “feldsher” into a term of opprobrium within the larger society. Thus the negative character traits that Chekhov ascribes to feldsher Smirnovskii embody precisely the kinds of criticism that physicians regularly cited when discussing feldshers’ overall qualifications.

Beginning in the 1870s, women were for the first time admitted to training as feldshers. For zemstvo officials and physicians they became an attractive alternative in hiring for several reasons. They were most often trained not simply as feldshers, but as feldsher-midwives, so their hiring offered the prospect of improving rural obstetric care. The opening of feldsher courses to women also had a significant appeal to urban, non-peasant women who had completed a significant portion of training in a classical gymnasium. By the turn of the century, such feldsher-midwives were the hires physicians preferred, whether because of their superior education and medical skills, their potential in providing obstetric care, or what physicians perceived as their overall *kul’turnost’*.<sup>56</sup>

53 G.M. Gertsenshtein, “K statistike fel’dsherizma v Rossii,” *Feldsher*, vol. 1, no. 3 (February 1, 1891): 34–35.

54 On the conflict between “*rotnye*” and “*shkol’nye*” feldshers see Ramer, “Who Was the Russian Feldsher?”

55 Veselovskii notes that in 80 districts of 244 that reported in 1898, more than half of the ambulatory patients were being treated exclusively by feldshers. In the majority of districts at that time, feldshers treated about the same number of ambulatory patients as physicians did. Veselovskii, 1: 345.

56 On the importance zemstvo physicians attached to improving obstetric care in rural areas see Ramer, “Childbirth and Culture: Midwifery in the Russian Countryside,” in David L. Ransel, ed., *The Family in Imperial Russia: New Lines of Historical Research* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 218–235.

Physicians were divided on just what they wanted from feldshers. Certainly they agreed that better training and a firmer grounding in science and modern medicine were essential, and on the whole they preferred the better-trained “*shkol'nye*” feldshers because of their superior education. But they also complained that such “*shkol'nye*” feldshers often had an exaggerated sense of their own self-importance (*samomnieniie*) and were prone to improvise in treating patients rather than carrying out physicians’ instructions precisely. There was clearly considerable diversity within the ranks of “*rotnye*” feldshers, and many physicians reported that such feldshers performed perfectly adequately as assistants within their clinics.

### “Thieves”: Introducing Feldsher Osip Yergunov

At first glance, “Thieves” might appear to have little to do with zemstvo medicine or its personnel, since the story itself does not take place in a strictly medical sphere. Unlike “An Unpleasantness,” which is set in the everyday realm of a small zemstvo hospital, most of “Thieves” takes place during the course of a single night at an isolated inn. But the protagonist, Osip Vasil'evich Yergunov, is a zemstvo feldsher in his mid-thirties, and his identity as a feldsher is a central fact in the story. The narrator informs us at the outset that Yergunov is “a shallow person known in the district as a great braggart and drunkard.”<sup>57</sup> The story provides remarkable access to Yergunov’s interior meditations, something that allows readers to share in the evolution of his thinking as well as his actions or speech. In the story, Yergunov recalls that he served as a feldsher during the Russo-Turkish War. Having retired from the army in 1878 after the treaty of San Stefano, he returned home and began to work for the zemstvo.

The zemstvo physician with whom Yergunov works has sent him to the nearby town of Repino to buy supplies for the rural hospital, and has even loaned him his best horse to make sure that he gets back quickly. Early in the evening, still about four miles from the hospital, he gets lost in a blinding snowstorm and seeks refuge in an isolated inn (*postoialyi dvor*). The atmosphere outside the inn fills Yergunov with apprehension; as he gathers his saddle and his purchases before entering the inn, he makes sure to take his revolver as well.<sup>58</sup>

57 Chekhov, PSSiP, *Sochineniia*, 7: 311.

58 For a discussion of Lermontov’s “Taman” as a model for Chekhov’s “Thieves” see L. A. Poliakevich (Leonard A. Polakiewicz), “‘Taman’ Lermontova, ‘Vory’ Chekhova i Intertekstual'nost',” *Chekhoviana* 1 (2007): 374–386.



Inside the inn, a girl named Lyubka is in charge. She is twenty years old, sexually attractive, and knows it. Barefoot and dressed in red, she exudes an overt sexuality that will play a major role in the story.<sup>59</sup> Yergunov recognizes her and recalls that her father was recently murdered by wagon drivers. On this evening, her widowed mother is away. Within the inn there are two other men who have also taken refuge from the storm. One is sleeping. Yergunov recognizes the other as a peasant named Kalashnikov from the village of Bogolyovka, a place he knows to be the home of horse thieves. Kalashnikov, who had visited the zemstvo clinic “to talk horses with the doctor,” also recognizes Yergunov. The other man, who soon awakens, is a dark-skinned peasant named Merik.<sup>60</sup>

Shut off from the world by the snowstorm, the garrulous Yergunov seeks from the outset to ingratiate himself with Kalashnikov, and particularly with Lyubka, and win their admiration and respect. Recognizing him from the hospital, Kalashnikov affects an exaggerated respect for his “learning.” This is feigned on his part, and one of the funniest parts of the story is Chekhov’s rendition of the ways in which people of such different social standing would speak with one another. (It’s important to note that Kalashnikov and the other peasant Merik address Yergunov using the formal “you”, whereas he uses the informal “you” in speaking with them).

Yergunov seeks to impress his companions by portraying himself as a man of enormous experience in life. He is also drinking more than they are and quickly becomes inebriated. The thieves clearly spot him as a braggart, and the dark-skinned peasant Merik (who is waking up) catches him lying about an incident in which Merik himself was involved. After a few initial exchanges, the two men cease to pay him any attention and even stop answering his questions. His “invisibility” is particularly galling to him, since “he wanted to talk with them, brag a bit, have a drink, eat his fill – and if possible, then to play around with Lyubka as well.”<sup>61</sup>

59 On Chekhov’s unusually frank depiction of sensuality in “thieves” see Joseph L. Conrad, “Sensuality in Čexov’s Prose,” 113–115. As Conrad notes, the story when originally published “was even more evocative of the hero’s sexual arousal than that of the version revised for publication in the 1901 edition of Čexov’s Collected Works.” (p. 113).

60 On horse thieves at this point in Russian history see Christine D. Worobec, “Horse Thieves and Peasant Justice in Post-Emancipation Imperial Russia,” *Journal of Social History*, vol. 21, no. 2 (Winter, 1987): 281–293. Worobec cites A. Levenstim’s calculation that 18,770 persons were tried for horse theft in Russia between 1888 and 1893. See also Mark Galeotti, “The world of the lower depths: crime and punishment in Russian history,” *Global Crime*, vol. 9, nos. 1–2 (February–May 2008): 84–107, esp. section “Horse thieves and the bandit tradition,” 92–96.

61 Chekhov, PSSiP, *Sochineniia*, 7: 316.

After a dinner that Lyubka serves, Kalashnikov begins to play his balalaika while Lyubka begins to dance provocatively with Merik. Yergunov, who continues his drinking, is more and more attracted to Lyubka and begins to fantasize about what kind of relationship they might have if only the other two men weren't there. Suddenly, when the music ends, Merik holds Lyubka in his arms and tells her "tenderly and affectionately, as if joking":

Later, I'll find out where your old lady's money is hidden, I'll kill her, I'll cut your little throat with my little knife, and after that I'll set fire to the inn. People will think that you both died in the fire, and with your money I'll go to the Kuban, where I'll drive herds of horses and take up raising sheep.<sup>62</sup>

Soon after Merik utters these chilling words, Kalashnikov announces that he is leaving. Yergunov follows him outside to make sure that he doesn't steal his horse and watches him ride off into the snowy darkness.

Following Kalashnikov's departure, Yergunov resumes his earlier fantasies about Lyubka. He's convinced that he could have sex with Lyubka if only Merik weren't there. If she proves unwilling, he muses, then raping her would be a possibility. Chekhov recounts Yergunov's cynical social justifications for such a hypothetical rape: "...if Merik weren't here, he thought, then he would certainly get up and embrace her, and what happened after that would remain to be seen. True, she was still a girl, but hardly a virgin – and even if she were a virgin, need one stand on ceremony in this den of thieves?"<sup>63</sup>

At this point, Merik announces that he too must be going. Lyubka, who is clearly in love with him, begs him to stay, and her words capture the intensity of her feeling: "Listen, Merik," she says, "I know you'll find Mother's money, you'll kill both her and me, and you'll go to the Kuban to love other girls, but I don't care. I'm asking only one thing of you, heart – stay!"<sup>64</sup> He whispers something in response, they both laugh, and he goes out the door. Yergunov senses that Merik is going to steal his horse, so he grabs his revolver and runs to stop him. But Lyubka stops him at the door, blocks his passage, and pretends that she wants him, even suggesting that he might be the man she loves. In a word, she manages to bar his departure sufficiently to protect Merik. By the time Yergunov gets outside Merik is gone, and so is his horse. The best that the frustrated Yergunov can do is to shoot at the dogs outside.

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62 Ibid., 320.

63 Ibid., 321.

64 Ibid.

At this point Yergunov goes back into the inn, finds Lyubka covered with a quilt and pretending to be asleep, and demands that she tell him where his horse is. She refuses, and they engage in a struggle that is at once erotic and violent. He tears the quilt from her, and in return she strikes him twice in the head with enough force to send him reeling, after which he staggers into the next room and collapses onto a bench. He doesn't lose consciousness, but the events of the evening, culminating in Lyubka's forceful blows to his head, leave him temporarily dazed. As dawn breaks, he puts on his hat and coat and leaves the inn.

### Feldsher Identity and the Radicalization of Yergunov's Consciousness

The problem of Yergunov's identity as a feldsher runs like a red thread throughout the entire story. This manifests itself in numerous ways. First, throughout the story Chekhov refers to Yergunov most often simply as "the feldsher," rather than by name, thereby suggesting that the title is in fact his primary social identity. Indeed, Chekhov continues to refer to him as "the feldsher" even after he's been fired by the zemstvo and is no longer working as a feldsher. The other characters in the story also see him in the first instance as a feldsher, since that is how they had earlier known him.

Second, at various points Yergunov himself reflects explicitly upon what his identity as a feldsher means to him. As he watches Lyubka dance with Merik, for example, he envies their unrestrained and carefree way of being. The narrator tells us that such reflections filled Yergunov with a profound sense of regret: "Why was he a feldsher, and not an ordinary peasant? Why was he wearing a coat and a watch chain with a little gilt key and not a navy blue shirt with a rope belt? Then he could have boldly sung, danced, drunk, and thrown both of his arms around Lyubka like Merik did..."<sup>65</sup>

The nature of Yergunov's regret makes it clear that he understands that being a feldsher is more than simply an occupation. His education and calling as a feldsher give him a certain position in society, to be sure. But this status comes at a price, and Chekhov is quite acute in describing Yergunov's perception of what that price is. It forces him to conform to certain norms of dress and behavior. Moreover, it is a position that involves permanent subordination to a physician's authority. Here Chekhov suggests a variation on Freud's notion that civilization is based upon repression.

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65 Ibid., 319–20.

However reluctantly, and more likely unconsciously, Yergunov has accepted whatever restrictions his feldsher identity imposes. Each stage in his career, from feldsher training to army service to working as a zemstvo feldsher, doubtless seemed natural enough at the time. But seeing the remarkably unfettered freedom in the bearing and gestures of Merik the horse thief – and even more his success in wooing Lyubka – makes him aware of just how circumscribed his freedom really is, and how diminished his identity as a man. In short, the story suggests that Yergunov at this moment comes to regard his identity as a feldsher as something that has denied him what he most wants: a free and masculine identity that he imagines will bring him the sexual prowess that he envies in Merik.

The blizzard has ended as Yergunov walks out of the inn in the early dawn. The prospect of explaining how he lost the doctor's horse fills him with anxiety. But as he walked, the narrator tells us, "he thought only about Lyubka and the peasants with whom he had spent the night." He is moved to compare the drama of the previous evening with his own drab existence. Suddenly, his "grey, monotonous life, his salary, his subordinate status, his pharmacy, the eternal bother with cupping glasses and bandages, struck him as contemptible and nauseating."<sup>66</sup>

Under the influence of the previous evening, he is suddenly struck by the insight that all of the values, arrangements, and expectations in society, most of which we assume to be inevitable, an immanent part of the human condition, are in fact entirely arbitrary. Such recognition strips these arrangements of any sort of legitimacy, whether that of tradition or of some putative rationality. This epiphany spawns a mental acceleration in which questions he had never previously contemplated rise before him:

Everything became confused in his mind, and he thought: why are there doctors, feldshers, merchants, clerks, and peasants in this world, and not simply free people? After all, there are free birds, free beasts, a free Merik, and they're not afraid of anyone, and they don't need anyone! And whose idea was it that one has to get up in the morning, eat a meal at midday, and go to bed at night, that a doctor is senior to a feldsher, that one must live in a room and love only one's own wife? Why shouldn't things be the other way around – to eat a meal at night and sleep during the day? Oh, to leap on a horse without asking whose it is, to race with the wind like a devil over fields and forests and ravines, to make love to girls, to make fun of everyone!"<sup>67</sup>

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66 Ibid., 325.

67 Ibid., 324–325.

The more he thinks in this vein, the more sweeping his meditations become. “Who says it’s a sin to have a good time?” he asks himself with vexation.

Those who say that have never lived in freedom like Merik or Kalashnikov, and haven’t loved Lyubka; they’ve lived their entire lives on their knees, they’ve lived without any sort of pleasure and made love only to their wives, who look like frogs.

And concerning himself, the narrator continues, “he now thought that if he had not become a thief, a swindler, or even a brigand up until now, it was only because he wasn’t capable of it or hadn’t yet encountered the right occasion.”<sup>68</sup>

Chekhov doesn’t end the story with feldsher Yergunov’s return to the hospital and his inevitable explanations about the stolen horse. Instead, he adds a coda that jumps forward eighteen months after the night at the inn. During the intervening months, the narrator informs us that Yergunov has been fired from his post as feldsher and is living from hand to mouth.

One summer evening, wandering in the countryside near Repino, he ponders the beauty of the starlit night. His thoughts return again to the radical vision he had first entertained eighteen months earlier. “The world is well made,” he thought, “but why and on what grounds

do people divide each other into sober and drunk, those employed and those fired, and so on? Why do the sober and the sated sleep comfortably at home, while the drunk and the hungry must wander afield without shelter? Why must someone who doesn’t have a job and doesn’t receive a salary necessarily be hungry, poorly clothed, without shoes? Whose idea was this? Why is it that the birds and forest animals don’t work or receive a salary, but live as they please?<sup>69</sup>

Immersed in these thoughts, he notices a red glow in the sky. An old man tells him that the glow comes from a fire at Andrei Chirikov’s inn. Yergunov recalls Merik’s threat, and his response is chilling:

He imagined how the old woman and Lyubka, with their throats cut, were burning, and he envied Merik. And as he walked back to the tavern, peering at the houses of rich inn-keepers, cattle dealers, and blacksmiths,

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68 Ibid., 325.

69 Ibid.

he contemplated: it would be good to break into some rich man's house at night.<sup>70</sup>

This is a quite terrible vision, one in which Yergunov registers no pity for the slaughter of Lyubka and her mother. On the contrary, he envies and even admires Merik, the assumed cutthroat, arsonist, and thief, whose extraordinary freedom knows no social or moral boundaries. If "An Unpleasantness" illustrates the extent to which our lives can be overwhelmed by the details of everyday existence, then "Thieves" goes a step further to imagine how the demeaning character of one's existence can, in the right circumstances, contribute to the radicalization of one's overall consciousness and perception of the world.

Dissatisfied with his social identity as a feldsher, Yergunov is led to perceive that everything in the existing order of things – values, habits, and customs – is arbitrary, without any claim to being just. Chekhov doesn't draw any final societal implications, but here in 1890 he has traced out a psychological profile of alienation and a yearning for a broader definition of "freedom" than feldsher identity provides. In the process, Chekhov has traced the path from Yergunov's overall frustration and perceived inadequacy of his social identity to a willingness to violate the basic laws of "thou shalt not steal," and by extension, through his admiration for Merik, of "thou shalt not kill." As Chekhov must have realized, it's only a step from this shift in consciousness to identifying oneself with an ideology and movement of expropriation and redistribution.

### Reflections on Social Identity, Everyday Indignities, and Violence

In these stories, Chekhov focuses intensely on several subjects. Both stories examine individuals' awareness of their social identity. In Yergunov's case, his contempt for his own identity as a feldsher is explicit. In the case of Dr. Ovchinnikov, as for many zemstvo physicians, the disparity between his learning and contributions on the one hand and the trust and confidence shown in him by his zemstvo superiors is a constant and grating reality. His experience in this regard replicates that of a host of zemstvo physicians. As for feldsher Smirnovskii, it is Dr. Ovchinnikov that speaks for him and other feldshers and "middling people" in bemoaning their marginal existence in society together with their fragile legal as well as material position in zemstvo service.

The second is how important the travails of everyday life can be in shaping our overall consciousness of the world and our place in it. Chekhov argues

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 326.

forcefully that seemingly incidental, even trivial, incidents play a decisive in our lives. Individually, these incidents may not be significant; taken together, however, as Dr. Ovchinnikov argues, they have the capacity to overwhelm us. Such emphasis upon the power of everyday experience has a particular significance when we recall the revolutionary discontent that grew so rapidly within Russian society during the last thirty years of the Imperial era. In our efforts to understand the shape and intensity of this discontent, Chekhov would have us look not only at state policies, social stratification, or revolutionary ideologies, but at the small indignities of everyday experience.

Both stories feature acts of violence that flow from the circumstances and relationships that the protagonists confront. In the case of “An Unpleasantness,” the entire story is built around the question of how to restore working relationships after the frustrated Dr. Ovchinnikov has lashed out at feldsher Smirnovskii and knocked him down in the presence of other hospital staff. But no less violent, in a way, is Dr. Ovchinnikov’s hysterical claim that the abuses he endures at the hands of his *zemstvo* superiors may drive him to start shooting people.

Ultimately, “An Unpleasantness” turns out to be just that. While the physical damage inflicted may have been minor, we nonetheless sense that there is enormous tension as well as fatigue in Dr. Ovchinnikov’s position. With the passage of only a few more years we can imagine that he will echo the sense of desolation that Dr. Astrov states in the most depressing fashion in *Uncle Vanya*:

In general I love life. But I can’t stand our parochial, Russian, philistine life and despise it with every fiber of my being. As far as my own personal life is concerned, honest to God, there’s absolutely nothing good in it. You know, when you’re going through the forest on a dark night, and if at that moment a light is shining in the distance, then you don’t notice your fatigue or the darkness or the sharp branches that strike you in the face...I work like no one else in the district – you know this. Fate beats me unceasingly and at times I suffer unbearably, but for me there is no light in the distance.<sup>71</sup>

Indeed, many *zemstvo* doctors could not take the aggravations and exhausting burdens of rural medicine for long. Some retired, or found employment in cities. Others retreated into drink. Still others took refuge in suicide. For the moment, however, Dr. Ovchinnikov and his feldsher return to their rounds. But the tension, the burdens, and the frustrations that Chekhov has laid out with humor as well as empathy, remain undiminished.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Chekhov, PSSiP, *Sochineniia*, 13: 83–84.

<sup>72</sup> On the variety of options to which physicians turned see Frieden, *Russian Physicians*, 126–127.

“Thieves”, on the other hand, raises violence to another level entirely: a horse is stolen, a rape is contemplated, an inn is torched, and the flames on the horizon suggest to Yergunov that Merik has brutally murdered Lyubka and her mother. The most shocking moment in “Thieves” is not the revelation of the crimes Merik seems to have committed: after all, he is a horse thief who promised to rob and kill in this fashion. What is astonishing is feldsher Yergunov’s response when he sees the inn burning in the distance. Encountering this scene, he feels not the slightest regret or sympathy for Lyubka, but rather admiration for and even envy of Merik’s freedom and daring in committing these crimes.

Both stories are suffused with an atmosphere of dark prophecy on Chekhov’s part. At the least, they portray a society with a powerful resistance to modernizing change, a theme to which Chekhov returns in stories such as “Peasant Women,” “Ward No. 6,” and “New Dacha”. But the story “Thieves” also suggests a society vulnerable to explosive and violent change led by individuals such as Yergunov who embrace a vision of freedom that is unrestrained by any inner core of values or code of behavior beyond their own search for gratification. Such a vision might well include plunder, violence, or power without civilizing restraint, which Yergunov contemplates at the story’s conclusion.<sup>73</sup>

In a literary sense, the most stunning passage is Chekhov’s description of Yergunov’s sudden questioning of all received values and codes of behavior, an almost Nietzschean “transvaluation of all values.” Here one tries to imagine Chekhov’s own sense of freedom as he followed his artistic instincts in describing this accelerated transformation. It’s unclear whether he envisioned this ending when he began the story. One has the sense that Yergunov’s radicalized vision came to Chekhov in a flash of intuition that he instinctively trusted. In a society on the cusp of revolutionary transformation, it was a profound psychological insight rooted in a broader social reality.<sup>74</sup>

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73 For a discussion of Chekhov’s darker vision that emphasizes Russia’s geography see Emma Polotskaya, “Chekhov and his Russia,” in Vera Gottlieb and Paul Allain, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 17–28.

74 Chekhov finished “Thieves” on the very eve of his departure for Sakhalin in April, 1890. We know very little about his thinking as he was writing the story except for the fact that he was absorbed with preparations for his journey. It seems at least possible that, in conjuring up Merik’s identity and values, he was mentally preparing for the convicts he would encounter on Sakhalin. We know that he rejected Alexei Suvorin’s criticism that Chekhov’s “objectivity” had shown an “indifference to good and evil, an absence of ideals and ideas and so on.” In responding to Suvorin he argued that it wasn’t his job as an artist to judge the thieves, a task best left to a jury, but rather to “show what sort of people they are.” To accomplish this, he concluded, he needed to “speak and think in their tone and feel in their spirit all the time,” a creative act that left no room for sermonizing. Chekhov, PSSiP, *Pis’ma*, 4: 54.