

Russian Intelligentsia in Search of an Identity

Between Dostoevsky's Oppositions and Tolstoy's Holism

By

Svetlana Klimova



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Acknowledgements

In 2005, as a Visiting Lecturer at the University of Fribourg, I met the brilliant connoisseur of Russian culture, Edward Swiderski, and for a long time after I remembered his words—that Russian philosophy was unlikely to claim a significant place in the history of world thought anytime soon. It is improbable that Europeans will ever be interested, on any large scale, in figures like Rozanov, Strakhov or Leontyev, he added. These are thinkers, largely marginal and ‘provincial’, without a clearly defined place in the history of philosophy.

Indeed, how is it possible to explain to a European audience, accustomed to categories and distinctions, Rozanov’s view that the Russian mentality can only be captured through a glance. ‘A Russian person looks at another one with a sharp eye, and everything becomes clear. And no words are needed. This is something that cannot be done with a foreigner’. How can something like that be understood through a glance? Is there some deep, ‘non-verbal’ context that provides psychological recognition of a person akin or alien to us? This kind of mystical philosophy is bound to come across as terrifying.

Fifteen years have passed since that meeting, and today Russian thought is significantly more open to the West and appreciated there. Russian philosophy is of genuine interest to American Slavists, amateurs and experts in Russian culture, literature and art. For many years, scholars have been discussing the specifics of the Russian intelligentsia. The names Dostoevsky and Tolstoy excite non-Russian readers as before, only now they are considered not only great writers, but also major thinkers and charismatic figures of their time. Research groups dedicated to the study of these figures include the International Dostoevsky Society and the Tolstoy Society of North America. And today, even the ‘marginal figures’ of Russian philosophy have entered into the orbit of Western scholarship. My work seeks to participate in this conversation on Russian thought, through the prism of the Russian intelligentsia’s search for its identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This small book was written quite quickly, but I thought about it for a very long time. I approached the topic from different ‘viewing angles’ so as to form a holistic picture of the Russian intelligentsia, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Strakhov and pre-revolutionary Russian culture, the latter of which was endlessly concerned about its own role in world history.

I believe that today, the era of the Russian intelligentsia is over. I believe this not only because there are no more new Dostoevskys or Tolstoys in Russia, but because the Russia of the former intelligentsia no longer exists. This was the