A HISTORY OF RUSSIAN THOUGHT

The history of ideas has played a central role in Russia’s political and social history. Understanding its intellectual tradition and the way the intelligentsia have shaped the nation is crucial to understanding the Russia of today. This new history examines important intellectual and cultural currents (the Enlightenment, nationalism, nihilism and religious revival) and key themes (conceptions of the West and East, the common people and attitudes to capitalism and natural science) in Russian intellectual history. Concentrating on the Golden Age of Russian thought in the mid-nineteenth century, the contributors also look back to its eighteenth-century origins in the flowering of culture following the reign of Peter the Great and forward to the continuing vitality of Russia’s classical intellectual tradition in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. With brief biographical details of over fifty key thinkers and an extensive bibliography, this book provides a fresh, comprehensive overview of Russian intellectual history.

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A History of Russian Thought
Edited by William Leatherbarrow and Derek Offord

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Preface

Savrasov’s famous painting *The Rooks have Returned*, which appears on the cover of this volume, was felt by the painter’s contemporaries to convey an authentic, quintessential Russianness. Kramskoy, leader of the so-called *peredvizhniki*, a group of painters who chose subject-matter that they perceived to be of national significance, singled the painting out for special praise when it was displayed in 1871 at the group’s first exhibition, on account of its possession of ‘soul’ (*dusha*). The birches in the foreground, to which the rooks have returned to build their nests as snow melts and nature’s annual renewal begins; the as yet bleak landscape stretching into a boundless distance under the weak sun of early spring; the meandering river; the ramshackle signs of human habitation in the rural vastness, including the wooden hut from which a wisp of smoke is rising; and – at the painting’s centre – the symbols of the Russian people’s religiosity, the church’s belfry and the onion-shaped domes: these images depict Russia’s heartland with a simple lyricism that seemed peculiarly appropriate to a section of the cultural elite at that juncture in her history. They poignantly evoked one aspect of a nation that was reappraising its position in the contemporary world and striving to define its distinctive character.

And yet it was a far cry, as every educated viewer of the painting would have been aware, from a village near Kostroma in the Golden Ring of ancient towns around Moscow, where Savrasov’s landscape was located, to the Baroque and Classical splendour of the modern capital city, St Petersburg. Founded at the beginning of the eighteenth century by the iron-willed ruler, Peter the Great (Peter I), who turned Russia’s gaze towards Europe, subjugated church to state and embarked on the creation of an empire, St Petersburg was a counterweight to introspective, Orthodox Moscow. It looked towards the West and modernity. The clash of the civilisations represented by these two aspects of nineteenth-century Russia – rural and urban, traditional and modern, religious and secular, inward-looking and outward-looking – proved magnificently productive, especially
in music and literature, as well as in painting, and in the corpus of thought on which it is the purpose of this volume to offer a new perspective.

The corpus of modern Russian thought has its origins no earlier than the eighteenth century, for it was only with Peter’s rapid westernisation of the administration and nobility in the first quarter of that century that firm foundations were laid for the creation of a secular intellectual culture. The classical period of Russian thought, its Golden Age, which coincided with the most luxuriant flowering of Russian imaginative literature, was in the middle quarters of the nineteenth century. That is therefore where the centre of gravity of this volume lies. After a period of relative decline towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the utopian dreams of the Golden Age collapsed, it underwent a renaissance in the so-called Silver Age, in the first quarter of the twentieth century. By then, though, a more rigorous philosophical tradition had become established alongside the tradition of impassioned aesthetic, moral, social and political speculation which we characterise as ‘thought’ and on which this volume chiefly focuses. After the October Revolution – the philosophical and cultural ground for which had been thoroughly prepared by the radical thinkers of the nineteenth century – the more oppressive political conditions served first to restrict the area within which independent thinking could take place and then, in the Stalinist period, effectively to suppress such thinking. And yet ideas with which thinkers had grappled in the classical age continued to have resonance in the 1920s and early 1930s and then again from the early 1960s, and they developed in new directions.

We have not attempted in this volume to produce a history of Russian thought that is strictly chronological and more or less comprehensive, after the manner of the magisterial volume published some thirty years ago by Andrzej Walicki on the period from the Enlightenment to Marxism. Nor have we sought to privilege any of the individual thinkers who are usually deemed to be of exceptional importance or who have achieved particular prominence in historiography as a result of admiring treatment by Soviet or western scholars. In any case much has already been written on most of these thinkers (for example, Bakunin, Belinsky, Chaadaev, Chernyshevsky, Herzen, Karamzin, Khomiakov, Ivan Kireevsky and Radishchev). Instead we have aimed to provide, in Parts II and III of the volume, a fresh, sweeping characterisation of Russian thought by reference to some of its main intellectual currents and key themes and constructs. We then seek, in Part IV, to draw out the continuing vitality and significance of this intellectual tradition, in new circumstances, in the post-revolutionary era. We hope in the process to show that Russian thought has presciently addressed
Preface

questions of contemporary and universal interest, such as the dilemmas of modernisation in backward nations, the importance to peoples of a sense of community and distinctive identity, the effects of crises of faith and the attractions and dangers inherent in systems of thought that offer comprehensive explanations of human experience.

In order to fill in the potential lacunae left by an approach that eschews strict chronology, the sustained intellectual biography of individuals and exhaustive enumeration of the representatives of each intellectual current, we have provided separately at the end of the volume concise information on some fifty major Russian thinkers. We also provide information there on a few of the leading classical writers, since their work was of cardinal importance to many thinkers (indeed, they themselves often ventured into the territory of ‘thought’) and since they may be unfamiliar to non-specialist readers, to whom the volume is intended to be accessible. Ten of the biographical entries have been written by Ruth Coates.

We have attempted to root the thought examined in the volume in a broad political, social and cultural context. For we believe that the subject cannot be properly understood without awareness of such factors as the late survival of absolutism, the retention by government of repressive powers that were falling away elsewhere in Europe, the survival of serfdom until 1861, Russia’s associated political, social and economic backwardness and the growing tension between the state and an emergent public opinion. To this end, two contributors have furnished surveys, of the political and social order and of the history and nature of the intelligentsia respectively. These surveys follow our introductory overview of the subject in Part I. Further appropriate contextual material has been included within several of the individual chapters in Parts II, III and IV. The extensive bibliography refers readers to secondary sources that will furnish them with further information on political, social, economic, scientific, literary and other cultural contexts as well as to sources on Russian thought itself.

We do not mean, by taking this essentially historicist approach, to imply that we see no merit in the argument that texts yield various – some would say infinitely numerous – meanings to individual readers living at different times and in different places. Indeed, Part IV of the volume, in so far as it deals with the reception of classical Russian thought in post-revolutionary times, addresses the question of the evolving meaning of that body of thought. Nor do we suggest that the non-fictional texts that serve as vehicles for Russian thought should invariably be read as examples of pure intellectual enquiry. (Here the distinction that we have made between ‘thought’ and ‘philosophy’ might again be borne in mind.) On the contrary, many
texts should be understood as highly subjective and polemical. They constituted the engagé journalism (publitsistika) with which the so-called ‘thick’ journals that played such an important part in nineteenth-century Russian intellectual life were packed. Such texts, no less than fictional texts, could be shaped by generic expectations, and they exhibited not a little literary craft. It is worth mentioning in this connection that many Russian thinkers and writers – Chernyshevsky, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Herzen, Karamzin, Khomiakov, Ivan Kireevsky, Pogodin, Pushkin, Radishchev, Shcherbatov, Tolstoy and Tiutchev are examples – moved easily back and forth across the boundaries between art, on the one hand, and non-fictional forms of writing, including publitsistika, on the other.

We take this opportunity, finally, to offer our warmest thanks to Linda Bree for her support of this project from its inception to completion and to Maartje Scheltens for her advice and assistance in the later stages of its production, to Christopher Feeney for his meticulous copy-editing of our manuscript and to Gareth Griffith for his assistance with compilation of the index.

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Note on dates, transliteration and other conventions

In 1700 Peter the Great adopted the Julian calendar, which was eleven days behind the Gregorian calendar in the eighteenth century, twelve days behind in the nineteenth and thirteen days behind in the twentieth. The Gregorian calendar, which western states had begun to adopt in preference to the Julian calendar in 1582, was not adopted in Russia until 1918. In this book dates are given in the Old Style (OS; i.e. according to the Julian calendar) when the event to which reference is made takes place in pre-revolutionary Russia and in the New Style (NS; i.e. according to the Gregorian calendar) when it takes place outside Russia.

Dates in parentheses after the titles of works mentioned in the text are, unless otherwise stated, the dates of first publication, not dates of composition.

We have in most respects followed the system of transliteration used in The Slavonic and East European Review. The Russian letter ё has everywhere been transliterated as e. Russian surnames ending in -ский have been rendered by the commonly accepted English form -sky (e.g. Dostoevsky), except in citations and transliterated titles in the notes and bibliography. We have also used the common English form -sky except in citations and transliterated titles in the notes and bibliography. The Russian soft sign has not been transliterated at all except in common nouns that are left in their Russian form in the text and, again, in titles of Russian works in the notes and bibliography, in which cases it is rendered by an apostrophe, e.g. artel’, Gogol’. Russian words printed in pre-revolutionary orthography (e.g. the titles of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century journals) have been transliterated from their modernised form.

We have preferred transliterated forenames (e.g. Aleksandr, Pavel, Petr) to translated ones (Alexander, Paul, Peter), except in the case of monarchs and other members of the Russian royal family, who are familiar to the English-speaking reader from the translated form.
Places are referred to by the name that was in use in Russia at the time of the work or event in question (thus Tiflis, in pre-revolutionary times, instead of Tbilisi). The modern place-name, where it differs from the name used in the text, is given in brackets.

The Russian title of each journal, newspaper or almanac mentioned in the text is given in the list of journal titles on pp. xviii–xix.
Dates (OS) of reigns in eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russia

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<tr>
<td>Peter I (i.e. Peter the Great)</td>
<td>1672–1725</td>
<td>son of Tsar Alexis (ruled 1645–76); co-ruled with his half-brother Ivan V 1689–96 and sole ruler 1696–1725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine I</td>
<td>1684–1727</td>
<td>Lithuanian peasant taken captive by the Russians in 1702; consort of Peter I from 1703 and his wife from 1712; reigned 1725–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter II</td>
<td>1715–30</td>
<td>infant son of Prince Alexis (1690–1718), who was the son of Peter I; reigned 1727–30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>1693–1740</td>
<td>daughter of Ivan V; reigned 1730–40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>1709–61</td>
<td>daughter of Peter I and Catherine I; reigned 1741–61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter III</td>
<td>1728–62</td>
<td>son of a daughter of Peter I and of Charles Frederick, Duke of Holstein-Gottorp; reigned 1761–2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Catherine II (i.e. Catherine the Great)</td>
<td>1729–96</td>
<td>German princess who came to Russia as fiancée of the future Peter III; reigned 1762–96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>1754–1801</td>
<td>son of Peter III and Catherine II; reigned 1796–1801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexander I</td>
<td>1777–1825</td>
<td>son of Paul; reigned 1801–25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicholas I</td>
<td>1796–1855</td>
<td>son of Paul and younger brother of Alexander I; reigned 1825–55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexander II</td>
<td>1818–81</td>
<td>son of Nicholas I; reigned 1855–81</td>
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<td>Alexander III</td>
<td>1845–94</td>
<td>son of Alexander II; reigned 1881–94</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nicholas II</td>
<td>1868–1918</td>
<td>son of Alexander III; reigned 1894–1917</td>
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Russian titles of journals, newspapers and miscellanies

All Sorts
Annals of the Fatherland: see Notes of the Fatherland
Bag
Beacon
Bell
Children’s Reading for Heart and Mind
Citizen in Conversation
Colloquy
Contemporary
Dawn
Day
Drone
Elements. The Eurasian Review
Epoch
Forward!
Landmarks
Maritime Miscellany
Messenger of Europe
Morning Light
Moscow Collection
Moscow Messenger
Moscow Monthly Publication
Moscow News
Muscovite
New Way
New World

Vsiakaia vsiachina
Koshelek
Maiax
Kolokol
Detskoie chtenie dlia serdtsa i razuma
Beseduishshchii grazhdanin
Beseda
Sovremennik
Rassvet
Den’
Truten’
Elementy. Evraziiskoe obozrenie
Epokha
Vpered’
Vekhi
Morskoi sbornik
Vestnik Evropy
Utreinnii svet
Moskovskii sbornik
Moskovskii vestnik
Moskovskoe ezhemesiachnoe izdanie
Moskovskie vedomosti
Moskvit’ianin
Novyi put’
Novyi mir
Russian titles of journals, newspapers and miscellanies

Northern Bee
Notes of the Fatherland
Our contemporary
Out of the Depths
Painter
Problems of Idealism
Problems of literature
Problems of Philosophy
Reading Library
Rumour
Rus (i.e. Old Russia)
Russian Colloquy
Russian Gazette
Russian Herald or Russian Messenger
Russian Thought
Russian Wealth
Russian Word
St Petersburg Learned Gazette
St Petersburg News
Signposts: see Landmarks
Son of the Fatherland
Spark
Telescope
Time
Tocsin
Tomorrow
Torches
Under the Banner of Marxism
Whistler
World of Art

Severnaia pchela
Otechestvennye zapiski
Nash sovremennik
Iz glubiny
Zhivopisets
Problemy idealizma
Voprosyliteratury
Voprosyfilosofii
Biblioteka dlia chteniia
Molva
Russ'
Russkiavestnik
Russkaia mys'l
Russkoe bogatstvo
Russkoeslovo
Sankt-Peterburgskie uchenye
vedomosti
Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti
Syn otechestva
Iskra
Teleskop
Vremia
Nabat
Zavtra
Fakely
Pod znamenem Marksizma
Svistok
Mir iskusstva