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978-0-521-45281-6 - Nietzsche and Soviet Culture: Ally and Adversary

Edited by Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal

Excerpt

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Introduction

Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal

Every author is surprised anew when a book, as soon as it has separated from him, begins to take on a life of its own.
(*HH*, p. 125)

Nietzsche and Soviet Culture? Their very juxtaposition is shocking. To Americans accustomed to associating the philosopher with individualism, self-fulfillment, artistic creativity, and post-structuralist literary theories, Nietzsche seems the polar opposite of Soviet culture, which subjugates the individual to the collective and art to politics. The juxtaposition is equally shocking to Soviets raised on an image of Nietzsche as prophet of Nazism; that he was a major influence on their own culture was unthinkable until very recently. Reinforcing neglect of the issue was the tendency of scholars, Soviet and Western alike, to treat the Bolshevik Revolution as a sharp dividing line in terms of politics and culture and to focus almost exclusively on politics. Interest in Soviet culture *per se* is relatively new. Cultural historians, however, more interested in social trends, institutional structure, or popular culture, than in ideas, have ignored Nietzsche or merely mentioned him in passing.¹ The same can be said for classic works of literary scholarship such as Robert Maguire's *Red Virgin Soil* and Rufus Mathewson's *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature*.² Katerina Clark asserts that "God-building" formed the "subtext of high Stalinist culture" and notes Nietzsche's importance to Zamiatin, Tynianov, and Kaverin,³ but does not go into detail. The few scholars who offer more extensive discussions of Nietzsche's influence limit themselves to a particular author and ignore the larger cultural context.⁴ Thus, although American scholar-

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ship⁵ amply documented Nietzsche's towering presence in pre-revolutionary culture, Nietzsche's overall importance directly and by proxy for Soviet culture was unacknowledged. That Nietzsche might have crucial explanatory significance on the sources, nature, and evolution of Soviet culture as a whole, was not even considered.

This volume restores the hitherto buried Nietzschean elements of Soviet culture, reveals the channels by which they flowed into and helped shape that culture, and documents the diversity and importance of their impact. It was not so much the direct influence of Nietzsche's ideas, though that was certainly found, that accounts for his continued presence in the culture, but the persistence, in transmuted form, of ideas and images that had become embedded in the culture before the Bolshevik Revolution. Without knowledge of Nietzsche's own writings and of previous Russian adaptations and interpretations of his ideas, the subsequent process of transmutation is virtually invisible. The first phase of Nietzsche's Russian reception provides the key to this process.⁶

Russians learned about Nietzsche in the 1890s. His popularizers were artists and writers, who hailed Nietzsche as the prophet of a new culture of art and beauty, and of a new kind of human being – courageous, creative, and free. His ideas served as a battering ram to smash “the old tables of values” (Z, pp. 51, 52); his call for a “revaluation of all values” provided intellectuals with a philosophical rationale for self-assertion, artistic creativity, and enjoyment of life, and sparked a search for a new “ruling idea” by which to live. Dmitri S. Merezhkovsky, the initiator of Russian Symbolism, melded Nietzsche and French estheticism with ideas taken from Russian writers, Dostoevsky and Soloviev especially, into a virtual religion of art. Worship of beauty was its first commandment. The esthetes of the World of Art movement, including Sergei Diaghilev, future impresario of Ballet Russe, were devotees of Nietzsche and Wagner. Nietzsche justified Maksim Gorky's break with Populism. Gorky's early short stories featured Nietzschean hobo heroes – amoral, asocial, hard. Contemptuous of weakness and cowardice, Gorky fre-

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quently quoted Nietzsche's dictum: "Man is something that must be overcome" (Z, pp. 65, 83). Ultimately, Nietzsche provided him with a new ideal – a Russian Superman, a warrior leader devoted to the people, but using the whip on them as well. Nietzsche's Russian admirers stressed what they called "the inner man," – artistic, cultural, and psychological issues.

Around the turn of the century, a new movement emerged – "God-seeking." Once again, Merezhkovsky was the initiator. Having "turned to Christ," but also responding to Nietzsche's critique of Christianity, Merezhkovsky maintained that a new Revelation was imminent, a positive Christianity which sanctioned the passions, human creativity, and will. Together with his wife, Zinaida Hippus, and their associate, Dmitri Filosofov, he founded the Religious-Philosophic Society of St. Petersburg. The Society featured debates between intellectuals and high Church officials on such issues as Christian attitudes to sex, and the excommunication of Tolstoi. The meetings attracted capacity audiences and became the fountainhead of a religious renaissance. A diverse movement, "God-seeking" encompassed Symbolist writers, Idealist philosophers, and others. The Symbolist writers Viacheslav Ivanov, Andrei Bely, and Alexander Blok, developed an archetype of the Dionysian Christ and invested art with redemptive significance. V. V. Rozanov railed against the Christian apotheosis of celibacy and virginity. Philosophers such as Nikolai Berdiaev, Simeon Frank, and Lev Shestov, challenged traditional conceptions of good and evil and emphasized non-rational factors in the human psyche, each in his own way. Most "God-seekers" (Sergei Bulgakov is a notable exception) regarded Nietzsche as a mystic and a prophet, unintentionally pointing the way to a renovated Christianity. Pavel Florensky's Orthodox theology is in part his response to "God-seeking" and to Nietzsche.

Around 1904, some hitherto apolitical "God-seekers" began to turn their attention to social problems. Viacheslav Ivanov urged the Symbolists to progress from symbol to myth, to create new myths (or reformulate old ones) around which intelligentsia and people could unite. During the Revolution of

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1905, he supported Georgy Chulkov's doctrine of Mystical Anarchism, a politicized Dionysianism which combined unlimited personal freedom with belongingness in a loving community. Not government or law, but love (Eros), sacrifice, and myth would cement it.

"God-building," another response to the Revolution of 1905, was a Marxist surrogate religion, a new myth to inspire the workers to fight and die for socialism. Gorky and Anatole Lunacharsky, future Bolshevik Commissar of Enlightenment, were its main formulators. Nietzsche provided Lunacharsky with a means to reconcile estheticism and Marxism, to argue that art can change consciousness, and is thus a powerful weapon in the revolutionary struggle. He was interested in religion and myth before he read Nietzsche, but Nietzsche reinforced his interest. Unlike most Marxists, Lunacharsky viewed religion positively as a vehicle for humankind's highest aspirations. He called Socialism the Religion of Labor. "God-building" reflects a collectivist application of *The Birth of Tragedy*. Its formulators championed both liberation of the instincts and transcendence of self in the cultic ecstasy (or enthusiasm) of a modern equivalent of the Dionysian rites.⁷ Superior individuals, they claimed, achieve true self-fulfillment by going beyond themselves in artistic and social creativity and in performing heroic deeds. They developed a myth of the rebellious (Promethean) masses as a source of life-giving energy and urged intellectuals to renounce egotism and think in terms of "we," rather than "I". Gorky maintained that the people are the source of all creativity, that it is the people who create God and not vice versa. The People, the spirit of collective humanity, not God, is the proper object of worship. He also believed, however, that strong aggressive leaders must channel popular energy and enthusiasm. This belief underlay his admiration for Lenin and his later cooperation with Stalin.

Strictly speaking, their ally Aleksandr Bogdanov (Lunacharsky's brother-in-law), was not a "God-builder," but the doctrine was based on his epistemology, and his novels *Red Star* (1908) and *Engineer Menni* (1912) represent his version of myth-creation. Intended to inspire the workers to continue

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their struggle, they present a vision of a future Communist society on Mars. Lenin vehemently opposed “God-building,” for he detested religion in any form, and because Bogdanov’s anti-authoritarian collectivist ethos contradicted his own idea of a centralized hierarchical organization. In 1909, he had Bogdanov expelled from the Party. Cut off from political activity, Bogdanov ruminated on cultural issues. His conclusion that workers must develop their own culture in order to liberate themselves psychologically and spiritually from the bourgeoisie, became the basis of the Proletkult (proletarian culture) movement after the Revolution.

“God-seekers” and “God-builders” alike conflated Nietzsche’s views on myth and cult with Richard Wagner’s ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total art work)⁸ and with Viacheslav Ivanov’s ideal of a cultic theater; the result was a Nietzsche/Wagner/Ivanov syndrome (Lars Kleberg’s term) that exerted a wide influence on the art and thought of the era. Constantly polemicizing with and cross-fertilizing one another, both groups recognized the impact of art on the human psyche and envisioned a refurbished cultic theater as the progenitor of a new communal consciousness. They believed that artists and intellectuals could deliberately create a new culture. Expecting the Revolution to engender a new man: strong, creative, beautiful, and loving, they interpreted Nietzsche’s “will to power” as cultural creativity rather than coercive political power. The very point of developing a new communal consciousness was to obviate the need for coercion. Psychic unity, resting on the passions and the instincts and evoked by art, would displace the rational self-interest of classic liberalism. Phrases such as the “unity of art and life,” the “estheticization of life,” and the “theatricalization of life,” dot the writings of both groups, as does Nietzsche’s phrase, “man is a bridge and not a goal” (Z, p. 215).

Apocalyptically oriented, both groups fused in various ways the eschatology of Russian sectarians, Soloviev, Merezhkovsky, Wagner, Bakunin, and Ibsen; to this brew the “God-builders” added revolutionary Marxism. Also important was the Slavophile ideal of *sobornost’*, unity in love and freedom, which they

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politicized to mean anarchism or syndicalism. Conflating *sobornost'* with visions of a cultic society that derived largely from Nietzsche and Wagner, the "God-seekers" emphasized an organic society whose members retain their individuality. The "God-building" version, "revolutionary *sobornost'*," to use Richard Stites's term, demanded almost total fusion of the individual with the collective.

Meanwhile, a kind of vulgar Nietzscheanism, a popular cult of the Superman which sanctioned immorality, abuse of power, promiscuity, self-will, anarchic individualism, and hedonism was percolating through Russian society. Nietzsche was widely interpreted to stand for sexual liberation and the return of the repressed rather than for sublimation, even though he often does argue for the latter. As early as 1904 Nietzsche was a household name; by 1911 all of his major works were available in Russian translation. Familiarity with his basic ideas, directly and as popularized by Russian and Western artists and writers, was simply assumed.

Symbolism, "God-seeking," and "God-building" served as points of departure for subsequent artists, thinkers, and political activists, and helped define the central issues of debates on art, literature, culture, and society which continued on through the twenties and were officially resolved in the early thirties. Symbolism entered a period of crisis around 1909–10; individual Symbolists remained creative, but went their separate ways. Two new literary/artistic movements, Futurism and Acmeism, arose to challenge it. These movements appropriated aspects of the Symbolist legacy, but read Nietzsche their own way, highlighting a different set of images and ideas, typically without acknowledging their source(s), for recognition was taken for granted. Indeed, differences between them were in many respects an argument over Nietzsche. The ideas of Bergson or Husserl, by contrast, were explicated precisely because they were new and as such unfamiliar to most readers. During the war, Nietzsche was associated with German militarism and Wagner's operas were banned from the Imperial Theaters, but around 1916, the "Nietzsche/Wagner/Ivanov" syndrome reemerged, to be adapted by the Bolsheviks to the

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new educational and propaganda tasks of the Soviet era. In the 1920s and 1930s, advocates of competing esthetic 'isms and cultural policies justified their respective positions with arguments taken from Nietzsche and/or his prerevolutionary Russian interpreters.

Despite Krupskaja's (Lenin's widow's) removal of Nietzsche's works (along with those of other "Idealists" such as Plato, Kant, and Soloviev), from the People's Libraries in 1923, his ideas continued to circulate. Early Soviet intellectuals and artists retained the cultural baggage of the Silver Age (roughly 1890–1914); privately owned works by and about Nietzsche passed from hand to hand, and young people heard about his ideas from older friends and colleagues. Symbolists found employment in early Soviet educational and cultural institutions, as teachers in the Proletkult schools, for example. New books on Nietzsche and reprints of earlier works on his ideas were brought out by newly legalized private publishers during the NEP (New Economic Policy – partial restoration of capitalism to provide incentives for productivity) years, 1921–27. State presses published Jack London, Upton Sinclair, and H. G. Wells, all admirers of Nietzsche, in hundreds of thousands of copies. Also translated were works by Romain Rolland, a French socialist interested in Nietzsche and Wagner. Soviet artists, intellectuals, and diplomats visited the West (ties were particularly close with Weimar Germany and, surprisingly, with Fascist Italy) and learned of the latest trends in art and thought there: new applications of Nietzsche by German Modernists, for example. Even in the Stalin era, two new books on Nietzsche were issued, and by state publishing houses at that: M. G. Leiteizen's *Nietzsche and Finance Capital*, with an Introduction by Anatole Lunacharsky (1928) and B. M. Bernadiner's *Nietzsche: Philosopher of Fascism* (1934). Between 1932 and 1934, Socialist Realism was established as the only permissible mode of artistic and literary expression. From then on it is important to distinguish between an official culture, Stalinism, and a non-official, often suppressed culture that began to surface after his death; Nietzschean ideas informed both of them. Continuously reformulated and re-

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adapted, they form a major link between prerevolutionary and Soviet culture, while at the same time illustrating the distinctive aspects of his Russian/Soviet reception and the concrete historical circumstances that shaped it. No serious studies of Nietzsche appeared in the Soviet period; the subject was too politicized.

Because Nietzsche was *persona non grata* for much of the Soviet era, his influence was exerted indirectly. Soviet readers received Nietzsche second-hand through the writings of Gorky, Lunacharsky, Mayakovsky, the Proletkult theorist Pavel Kerzhentsev, the theater and film critic Adrian Piotrovsky, the classical scholar Tadeusz Zielinski (one of the few academic admirers of Nietzsche), and Bogdanov. The latter's ideas, taken up, often crudely, by Proletkult activists, were propagated in countless pamphlets and periodicals; *Red Star* was reprinted in 1918, 1922, 1928, and a stage version was produced by the Proletkult theater in 1920. Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* was still another conduit for Nietzsche (and Goethe), whose influence Spengler explicitly acknowledged. Translated into Russian as *Zakat Evropa* (*The Decline of Europe*), the book was banned in the Soviet Union, but its main ideas were discussed in Soviet journals and reinforced Bolshevik convictions of their superiority over the "rotting West." In many cases, it is virtually impossible to tell whether or not a particular Soviet writer or political activist read Nietzsche and/or one or more of the authors listed above, or simply picked up ideas which were "in the air." In this volume, the adjectival term Nietzschean will be used for ideas and images derived from him directly and indirectly.

Successive generations of writers, artists, and political activists extracted what they deemed relevant to their current concerns from the general stock of Nietzschean ideas and images. Reading Nietzsche is a very different experience than reading Marx. Rather than doctrine or ideology, Nietzsche created striking slogans, alluring images, and provocative ideas that often stuck with people long after their initial impression. People read their own meaning into the "Superman," the

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“revaluation of values,” the “new values on new tablets.” Nietzsche’s memorable phrases and emotionally charged images became detached from their context and took on a life of their own. They exemplify that ineluctable process whereby ideas seize the imagination of an entire generation. Nietzsche keeps appearing, directly and by proxy, in discussions of art, literature, and cultural policy – rarely as an exclusive factor but, time and again, as a contributing factor. These contributions cumulatively shaped Soviet attempts at “culture-building,” a dominant issue in Nietzsche’s works and one which permeates our study. This does not imply that any Soviet intellectual who rejected or ignored Nietzsche was in the grips of a philistine state ideology.

This volume will avoid terms such as “deformed” or “distorted,” for it is not intended to answer the question of what Nietzsche really meant, nor to promote one particular interpretation of his ideas. Rather, it will focus on which of his ideas were used, what the Soviet writer, artist, or political activist did with them, and why. Although most of the chapters treat literature, our focus is not so much on the text *per se*, but on the larger cultural context in which it was written and understood as part of a continuous, often covert, dialogue. Reaction to Nietzsche stimulated new and creative responses to his ideas on the part of writers, artists, and political activists. For this reason, even rejection of Nietzsche often denotes his influence.

If Nietzsche is not mentioned by name, how does one recognize his influence, what was the nature of that influence at different stages of Russian and Soviet history, and what accounts for its amazing durability? One cannot really expect artists, writers, and political activists to make statements such as “I read Nietzsche and then decided to paint the Superman.” In some cases, we know for a fact that the writer read Nietzsche. In other cases, his influence can be deduced by the presence of parallel texts, ideas clearly associated with Nietzsche, or a “Nietzschean” vocabulary – the latter signifying one important way in which the philosopher’s ideas were absorbed into the culture. Assessing his influence is a subtle process; it entails dealing with intangibles, digging up the

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“buried Nietzsche” (John Burt Foster’s term), discovering ideas and assumptions taken for granted and hence undefended and unexplained by their advocates. Foster’s seminal work *Heirs to Dionysus* focuses on the appropriation of Nietzsche by great writers of the West.⁹ Edith Clowes’s *The Transformation of Moral Consciousness* details how Nietzsche’s influence led to reformulation of key intelligentsia myths before the Bolshevik Revolution. Our task is even more complex and elusive, for it goes beyond the issue of what individual writers took from Nietzsche to his influence on an entire culture. Complicating the issue even further, the transfer of ideas from one national culture to another entails shifts of meaning and emphasis. Nuances are lost in translation; the translator ascribes his/her own meanings, especially if there are no exact equivalents for certain words or concepts. Other mutations and transformations occur in the intrinsic and subtle process by which the original idea is adapted to the dominant ideas, values, and beliefs of the host culture.¹⁰ On the other hand, as Graham Parkes notes, the responses of foreign interpreters who read their own cultural assumptions into the text are not necessarily distortions, but “may serve to open us to hitherto concealed aspects of the corpus.”¹¹

The contributors to this volume employ a variety of methodologies, including textual analysis. Where it is possible to establish a writer’s specific dependence on Nietzsche, the authors have done so. Their chapters are also informed, in a general sort of way, by methodologies which go beyond the text, not so much to explain what the writer really meant, but to recapture the context in which the text was written, the unstated assumptions that permeate it, the ways it was interpreted by different people at different times. Here the insights of a new field, cultural studies, are relevant.¹² Not a discipline, but an area where different disciplines intersect, its practitioners move beyond the traditional view of culture as the product of a small creative elite to a more comprehensive view of the broad spectrum of practices through which a society constructs and transmits the meanings and values that inform its everyday life and which cumulatively comprise its culture.