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Russian Intelligentsia in Search of an Identity

Between Dostoevsky's Oppositions and Tolstoy's Holism

Author: Svetlana Klimova

Russian Intelligentsia in Search of an Identity considers the problem of the Russian intelligentsia's self-identification in its historic-philosophical and historic-cultural aspects. The monograph traces the rise of the intelligentsia, from the 18th century to the present day, problematizing its central ideas and themes. In this historical context, it proceeds to investigate the distinctive intellectual, spiritual and biographical opposition of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy in relation to the character and fate of the Russian intelligentsia, with its patterns of thought, ideology, fundamental values and behavioral models. Special attention is given to the binary patterns of the intelligentsia's consciousness, as opposed to dialogical and holistic modes of apprehension.

Readership

For readers interested in the history of Russian culture and philosophy of the 19th-20th centuries, in particular the history of the intellectual traditions of the Russian Intelligentsia.

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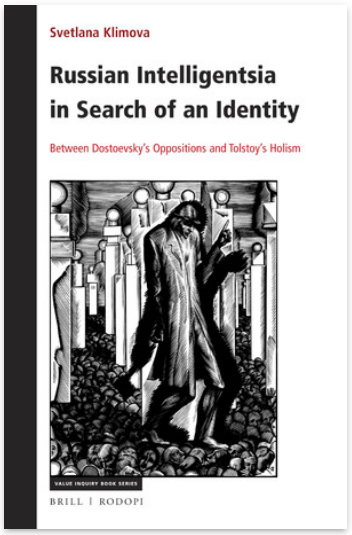

Pages: xii, 228 pp.
Language: English
Subjects: 19th & 20th Century Philosophy, Philosophy, Intellectual History, History, Social & Political Philosophy, Philosophy
Publisher: Brill | Rodopi

Series:
Value Inquiry Book Series, Volume: 355
Value Inquiry Book Series Online, Volume: 355
Contemporary Russian Philosophy, Volume: 355

E-Book (PDF)
Publication Date: 25 Sep 2020
ISBN: 978-90-04-44062-3
List price
EUR €115.00 / USD $138.00

Hardback
Publication Date: 17 Sep 2020
ISBN: 978-90-04-44060-9
List price
EUR €115.00 / USD $138.00

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Value Inquiry Book Series

VOLUME 355

Contemporary Russian Philosophy

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The writing of this book was supported by grant no. 19-08-00100 from the Russian Science Foundation.

Cover illustration: «Идея Раскольникова». Иллюстрация к роману Ф.М. Достоевского «Преступление и наказание». 1971 г. Линогравюра. Artist – S.S. Kosenkov; image used with permission of the heirs of the artist.

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available online at http://catalog.loc.gov
LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2020917287

Typeface for the Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic scripts: "Brill". See and download: brill.com/brill-typeface

ISSN 0929-8436
ISBN 978-90-04-44060-9 (hardback)
ISBN 978-90-04-44062-3 (e-book)

This book is printed on acid-free paper and produced in a sustainable manner.

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Introduction

This monograph addresses a perennial theme of a distinctly Russian character: that of determining the role and significance of a specific segment of society, namely, the intelligentsia. The text traces the rise of the intelligentsia, from the 18th century to the present day, at the same time problematizing its central ideas. Beginning with this historical background, the book proceeds to investigate the distinctive intellectual, spiritual and biographical opposition of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy in relation to the history, character and fate of the Russian intelligentsia.

It might seem that hundreds of books and scholarly investigations have already been written on the subject. And yet, *perestroika* has given a new impetus to the dialogue concerning the intelligentsia, its fate and the possibilities of its revival—or perhaps its coming to be 'dead again', to recall a phrase coined by Masha Gessen, the Russian-American journalist. This work ventures to revisit these historic themes, since the existing formulations of the nature of the Russian intelligentsia and the specifics of its national self-identification have been found not adequately reflected upon in our social reality. The present is indeterminate and, just as we did three hundred years ago, we Russians once again find ourselves searching for answers to the question of who we are, as we attempt to defend our own sense of distinctiveness in a multipolar world, and to produce a differentiated narrative of our own identity. The precariousness of the present geopolitical situation lends a particular urgency to these questions.

National self-consciousness is a complex moral-philosophical construct. It involves basic qualities that might apply to any given ethnic group, as well as some peripheral characteristics connected to the variety of possible moral dispositions and narratives of real and mythological situations, to the heroes and anti-heroes, to notions of good and evil, to liberal versus conservative worldviews, etc. The means, by which these narratives, whether rational or irrational, are perpetuated, play a crucial role. The distinctiveness of the present approach lies in its substantiation of the account of the rise of the Russian intelligentsia. This rise is conceived, here, as a movement from an individual's capacity for reasoned inquiry, through the dialogical principle, towards the emergence of a binary consciousness, which tends toward the linear, the 'partial' and is prone to taking sides in polarized debates. In the fragmentary historic-philosophical reconstruction of the processes that governed the self-identification of the Russian intelligentsia, a certain recurrent pattern becomes discernible, as we

witness the predictable movements of thought from dialogical to binary consciousness, the latter being based on the principle of the pendulum, and opposed to the holistic, all-encompassing mode of apprehension that we can observe in certain thinkers. Binary consciousness is rooted not solely in its set of formal categories but also in the values implicit in the idea of the intelligentsia itself, in their recurrent transformations within a shared worldview and in its collective creation over the course of several centuries. The combination of an individual 'whole mind' with a one-dimensional ethics, culminating in the fanaticism of self-sacrifice or self-destruction is a feature of the behavioral model that characterizes the Russian intelligentsia at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The intellectual precursors for the emergence of this oppositional and inversion-prone mode of thinking and of its accompanying values are to be found as far back as the reforms of Peter I, which gave way in turn to the ideology of Catherine the Great's 'Golden Age'. The problem of national self-consciousness, as a concrete historic challenge, developed first and foremost within the frameworks, both of the ideological worldview upheld by the state, and that of the artistic-critical perspective that belonged to the intelligentsia; as such, it came to be formulated in the course of the dialogue *between* the intelligentsia and the state. This dialogue was initially shaped by the two parties' shared understanding of the proper *subject of national self-consciousness*: this was understood to be the intelligentsia, as a specific subset of the gentry. This group silently proclaimed itself to be the 'ambassador' for the rest of the Russian people in their search for answers to the crucial questions of the time. This standing continues to allow the conflation of the views and ideas of the intelligentsia with those of the *narod*—the Russian people at large, essentially identical with the country's indentured peasant class. The direct and indirect dialogues between intellectuals and the state and state authority supply the basis for an understanding of other possible dialogical interactions between various intellectual and social groups within Russia, as well as of the causes and the modes of the transformation of dialogical into binary consciousness. At the same time, the principal object of reflection by both parties—the intelligentsia and the state—was revealed to be the Russian people itself (the so-called '*narod*') and the specificity of Russian national consciousness: in other words, the very core of national identity.

The sources of the perpetual Russian crisis of identity are not to be found in the economic sphere, nor in the practical realm, but in the sphere of the endless metamorphoses of the intelligentsia's consciousness, in both its public and private aspects. One of the main mistakes of the intelligentsia lay in its desire to take charge of history, to attempt to get a handle on the global future,

and to do so not by means of an internal self-development but via an external refashioning of Russian life, guided, not by individual responsibility, but by collective agenda and 'party allegiance'. The dualistic world of Russian culture, including its literature and philosophy, took shape in the grip of these ideological forceps. Nevertheless, the categories of dualistic binary thinking did not emerge in an unambiguous linear opposition. The path of their development was full of twists and turns, and was marked by traces of dialogical thought and by attempts to construct a genuinely humanistic (and therefore holistic) mode of reasoning, which would characterize many a generation of the Russian intelligentsia.

This monograph surveys the patterns of discussion concerning the nature and essence of the Russian national self-consciousness, a discussion that ranged from the 18th-century collaborative inquiry, (conducted jointly by the intellectuals and the state) to the stark opposition of parties to the dialogue in the 19th and early 20th centuries. A significant role in this process belonged to what became known as 'public opinion', with the creation of which the present work credits Pyotr Chaadaev, who is seen as the originator of a new form of conversing about Russia's history, its national self-consciousness and prospects, and who succeeded in shifting the discussion from the forums of state power, literature and scholarship onto the wide-open public sphere. At the same time, Chaadaev came to be one of the creators of this novel public sphere, drawing into it a broad contingent of educated (i.e., literate) and semi-educated members of society who were destined to become a special intellectual force, with its own independent judgments and actions in the spheres of historical becoming and the consolidation of national self-awareness.

It was Fyodor Dostoevsky who, as a great crystallizer of public opinion, instigated the division of the intelligentsia into its philosophical and radical segments, through reinforcing the basic binary oppositions of his time and thereby instilling them in the public consciousness. Dostoevsky's imagination penetrated not only public opinion, but also many of the epoch's ideological commitments, his creations becoming permanent features of the nation's patriotic and religious attitudes. Dostoevsky's subjective and discursive generalizations became the substrate of his individual myth-making. As a result, his texts came to be understood as representative, as opposed to realistic. As the author and proponent of the 'Russian idea', Dostoevsky was always in need of an opponent—'-the other', conceived in terms of the opposition of 'I and the not-I', the Russian and the un-Russian. This opposition became the basis of the novelist's literary and critical discourse, which contrasted the 'universal compassion' of the Orthodox-Christian, communitarian Russian people with the merely 'local compassion' of the non-Russian, individualistic West—'the West' being a

metaphoric construct involving Catholicism, capitalism, private property and calculation, as well as images of the un-Russian, 'parasitic' peoples (Dostoevsky's '*narody-miroyedy*') such as the Poles or the Jews. Nonconformists within the intelligentsia itself were swallowed up by the same polarized framework, which made it possible to fit the multiplicity of ideas, views, approaches, individuals and ethnic groups into a minimalist scheme of opposition between all that is Orthodox-Christian, faith-based and 'good' and, on the other hand, the rational and 'bad' habits of the West.

Dostoevsky's artistic myth-making was not a conscious attempt at an ideological distortion of reality; rather, it was a way of preserving and strengthening a single overarching idea—which was nevertheless partial, like all the ideas and ideologies to which people have been sacrificed over the course of history. The myth demanded synthesis, a fusion of everything with everything else: idea and reality, feeling and reason, action and conviction. Its dissemination, however, resulted in the reinforcement of binary thinking and ideological polarization. In this respect, one specific feature of mythical thinking is its propensity to present *consequences* as *causes*, *historic* events as *natural*, the *accidental* as *archetypal*. At a time when secularization broadened the divide between church and society, Dostoevsky was creating a religious mythology that united thousands of young devotees. At the same time, despite his condemnation of the intelligentsia's rootlessness, his position with respect to this social group appears to have been double-edged: having portrayed the intelligentsia and described its typology, he was, to a degree, complicit in its creation; yet he was also, in a sense, its destroyer, having depicted young radicals and their demonic nihilism in the darkest tones. Paradoxically, in his desire to affirm unambiguous ideas and values, Dostoevsky created a singularly original form of 'polyphonic novel' (as Mikhail Bakhtin termed it). Maxim Gorky noted that the dialogical structure of Dostoevsky's works allowed the readers 'to correct the thoughts of his characters' according to their own perspective and preference. Yet, together with the holism characterizing Dostoevsky-the-artist and reflected in the form of his works, we glimpse in them a different Dostoevsky—the conservative thinker, nationalist, xenophobe and anti-Semite, who cast the thinking, suffering, sacrificial (as opposed to merely nihilistic) type of Russian intellectual in opposition to the *narod* (the Russian people at large), to Orthodox faith and to Russia itself.

Essentially opposed to Dostoevsky's are the thought and religious philosophy of Lev Tolstoy, whose life and art refuted the binary approach to reasoning and attempted to revitalize dialogue and holism as the foundations of thought as such. Tolstoy originated a new kind of religious consciousness within Russia, founding nothing short of a new *religious philosophy of life*. Its distinctiveness

has to do with its pursuit of the unity of the *object of philosophy*—human life and its meaning—and its *method*, which he termed 'the circular method' ('*metod kruga*'), or the method of 'engagement' ('*stsepleniye*'), meaning the simultaneous and comprehensive engagement of all the fundamentals of human knowledge about life into a single principle of *meaning* and abstention from any analysis of that meaning into component parts. Perhaps paradoxically, Tolstoy became antagonistic to those who attempted to cast ideas and nations, faith and reason, culture and civilization into partisan and oppositional molds. Tolstoy's principle of 'not resisting evil with violence' implied the individual's practical refusal to participate in the 'evil doings of the state' and a deliberate abstention from political activity. Instead, he directed his readers to turn away from moral utilitarianism and from coercive practices of goal-setting and achievement, and to turn instead inward in the first instance, and toward the possibility of a non-coercive relationship with the self. This was the pursuit of 'the Kingdom of God' within. As a counterweight to Dostoevsky's nationalist proclivities, Tolstoy proposed genuinely humanistic ideas regarding the brotherhood of all peoples and of equality, balanced by the preservation of the unique particularities of each person, culture or religion. Tolstoy's religious philosophy was practically-oriented and actively loving. As a defender of ethnic minorities, of those most disadvantaged and oppressed—landless peasants, survivors of fires, the hungry, the homeless, the jobless, the inhabitants of terrible public shelters—he sought a path towards the common Good—the God understood by Tolstoy as the 'Ocean of love' that has no beginning nor end. In merging with it, the human being is reunited with humanity, attaining eternal life, the way a drop of water finds immortality when merged with the ocean. But such a commitment did not at all accommodate the social practices of the intelligentsia.

The early 20th century saw the emergence of a generation of existential and religious thinkers who followed the paths of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, attempting to construct a philosophy of life to counteract the philosophies of wars and revolutions proceeding from the state and from the circles of the radical intelligentsia. Unfortunately, these attempts to restore individual and humanistic values to historical agency were unsuccessful. That century became a time of masses and tribalization, of the death of God and human alike, of dehumanization in every aspect of public life. To an optimist or a believer, the latter may not appear irreversible.

Despite the diametrical opposition of Dostoevsky's and Tolstoy's views, history has revealed the catastrophic results of the oppositionist and nationalist views of the former, and of the hopelessly romantic and utopian faith of the latter. Above all, it has tested Tolstoy's faith in the loving and actively religious

human. To substantiate these conclusions, this work will draw a series of comparisons between Tolstoy's teachings and the ideas of Max Weber and Hannah Arendt.

The results of these deliberations await the reader who will pursue them to the end of this book. What author would not hope and wish for this.

Postscript

This book is the fruit of a desire to revisit the history of the intelligentsia, with its consciousness and identity, and to reflect on it both individually and in the collective context. Yet it turned out that this subject, although attractive, is secondary to questions concerning human nature, its mystery, complexity and simplicity. Does something in it remain constant when the moral and spiritual laws change, and the known world crumbles? Can a human being preserve her or his dignity in times when 'perennial values' lose their significance? What are good and evil, and why is it that not only does the human stands in need of God, but also the other way around? The Russian intelligentsia is a study in these mysteries, a fanciful blend of capacities for thought, critical dialogue, religious ecstasy, multifarious creativity, self-sacrifice—and, at the same time, the proclivities for 'nastiness', underground thinking, Eichmannism, and senseless violence.

Our investigation has been two-fold: it is an attempt to understand the nature of personhood through the dialogical space of literature and journalism in the 18th and 19th centuries; at the same time, it is also an analysis of the intelligentsia's attraction towards binary and polarizing patterns of thought, which we have called 'the pendulum of binary consciousness'. Individual mythmaking arose as a counterbalance to logic and the kind of dialogue that characterizes free thought. This is a vivid motif in Dostoevsky's nationalist and patriotic discourse. By contrast, Tolstoy's thought and imagination appear to be an important attempt in resisting such mythmaking. While Dostoevsky reinforced the negative image of the *intelligent*, reproducing and affirming a binary normative code, Tolstoy, on the other hand, attempted to reintroduce critical dialogue and holism as presences in Russia's intellectual life. As Yuriy Lotman pointed out, 'Dostoevsky used reality to illustrate his ideological conceptions, while Tolstoy put reality in conflict with ideological schemes, and in such a way that reality always proved to be something richer'.[1] The role that these two great Russian thinkers have played in Russia's intellectual history is indisputable. The two of them were two major facets of that history, and are frequently presented as *opposites* within a polarized binary conception of the literary space, within which Dostoevsky and Tolstoy repeatedly take turns at being deified or demonized as representatives of Russian culture's fundamental values. The frontline of this opposition is connected to the image of Christ and to Christianity as a religious doctrine and philosophy. Dostoevsky's Christ is

1 Ю.М. Лотман, О русской литературе (СПб.: Искусство-СПб, 2012), 599.

'distinctly yet inseparably' united with his ideas of the God-chosen Russian people, whose receptiveness to the voice of God (the Russian for 'receptiveness' being homonymous with 'compassion', '*otzyvchivost'*) is the reason for its special vocation to save the world, and to become a spiritual leader by realizing the 'Russian idea' in Europe through a process of spiritual expansion. This utopia was destined to become a dystopian history, which had been nevertheless foreshadowed by Dostoevsky himself: 'The world will be saved after it is visited by the evil spirit'. 'This evil spirit is near', he continued, 'perhaps, our children might already see it'.[2]

Such leadership as Dostoevsky had envisioned proved to be achievable, but in the inverted world of communist expansion and ideology—in Konstantin Leontyev's memorable figurative summation, 'Dostoevsky's Inquisitioner rose up from his coffin and stuck out his tongue'. Leontyev could not have foreseen the real inquisition and its terrors as inflected by a specifically totalitarian character, or the repression of people and cultures not only in Russia but the world over. Yet Varlam Shalamov, who spent twenty years in Soviet labor camps, knew this well. 'Dostoevsky, in his penal servitude', he wrote about *Notes From The House of The Dead*, 'never met any real criminals, and had he met them, we would have been deprived of this book's finest pages, which affirm his faith in people and their better nature'.[3]

As for Tolstoy, he took a different approach to this subject, and we attempted not only to show the nature of his religious, political and pacifist views but also to inscribe his philosophy into the problematic common to all of the Russian intelligentsia, which concerned good and evil, patriotism, egoism, faith and reason, and the pursuit of a peaceful and fraternal human life in this world. Tolstoy's alternative to Dostoevsky's mythmaking was located entirely in the artistic and religious-philosophical sphere, and it was predicated on answering the questions: can the evils of alienation and polarization be overcome by a single individual's resources of thought, moral feeling and spirit? Is it possible for people to come together not forcibly and by necessity but voluntarily, guided by love alone? Is it possible to preserve God, and to live a godly life in a world that awaits Dostoevsky's 'evil spirit' of destructive totalitarian evil?

In attempting to engage with these questions, we thought it necessary to compare Tolstoy's views with the ideas of Hannah Arendt and Max Weber, showing the commonality of the philosophical basis and ethical dispositions shared by these three thinkers, whose common metaphysical and moral

2 Dostoevsky, *A Writer's Diary*, 21, 201–04.

3 В.Т. Шаламов, 'Очерки преступного мира', Собрание сочинений в 4 т. (М.: Варгус, 1998), т. 2, 6.

platform was Kantianism and Kant's answer to the question of 'What is man?' All three thinkers, in spite of their national, cultural and temporal differences, *collaborated* (in the context of European intellectual history) in solving a series of crucial humanistic questions of contemporaneity. The main current of their thinking involved the spheres of judgment, responsibility and action. It is with reference to their shared Kantian heritage that they propose their contradictory conclusions. Just like Arendt, Tolstoy had been convinced that human beings are guided in their lives by ideal, transcendental principles; yet he also paid homage to Rousseau in considering civilization to be the cause of corruption and in actively opposing its influence.

Tolstoy's position was received in such a way that he was blamed, in the end, for the emergence of Bolshevism and for the revolution. The intelligentsia, in its characteristic manner, found it necessary to shift its own responsibility for these events elsewhere. Dmitriy Merezhkovsky, who had, ten years prior to the revolution, demanded to be excommunicated from the Church together with Tolstoy, declared in 1918 that 'Bolshevism is Europe's suicide. It started with Tolstoy and ends in Lenin'.[4] Berdyaev's, too, was an unignorable contribution to the mass of these accusations, reflecting his own binary evaluative method:

> Tolstoy intuited and expressed the particulars of the moral makeup of the greater part of the Russian intelligentsia, perhaps even of the Russians at large. The Russian revolution represents a certain kind of victory for *tolstovstvo*…. The Russian revolution would like to decimate the whole of our cultured society, to drown it in the primal dark of folk consciousness, and Tolstoy is one of those culpable for the destruction of Russian culture. By his moral undermining of the possibility of creation within the culture, he poisoned the sources of artistic creativity. He poisoned the Russian people with moral introspection, which made them powerless and incapable of historic and cultural action. Tolstoy is genuinely a poisoner of the wells of life.[5]

In his twilight years, Berdyaev would once again confess his love for Tolstoy in *Self-Knowledge*, yet in 1918 he saw Tolstoy and Dostoevsky under the sign of opposition, ascribing to one all that was the first in the Russian people, and vice versa. Describing Dostoevsky's role, he wrote:

4 Д.С. Мережковский, Царство Антихриста (Munchen: 1921), 191–98.

5 Н.А. Бердяев, 'Духи русской революции', Из глубины: Сборник статей о русской революции (М.-Пг., 1918).

> Dostoevsky revealed that the nature of the Russian person is a fertile soil for the Antichrist's temptations. This was a genuine discovery, and it made Dostoevsky a prophet of Russian revolution. He had a gift of inward vision, a vision of the spiritual nature of the Russian revolution and Russian revolutionaries.

Thus, Dostoevsky's prophetic denunciation of the 'demons' was contrasted with Tolstoy's supposed revolutionary demonism. It would be logical to suppose that Tolstoy was also responsible for engendering the 'demons' by his calls to non-violence and to following Christ's commandments. The absurdity of such a conclusion is easily resolved within the binary scheme proposed by Berdyaev, a representative of the polarized thought of the intelligentsia. And yet, at the same time, the same epoch (this time personified by Maxim Gorky) proffered diametrically opposite evaluations of Tolstoy as the positive pole and Dostoevsky as the 'evil spirit' responsible for the phenomenon of 'Karamazovism'.

One way or another, the Russian intelligentsia was replaced by the Soviet intelligentsia, and the latter found itself not only at the service of totalitarian ideology but also in the role of its antagonist, charged with resisting the atmosphere of Stalinist oppression and injustice. Referring to Yuriy Levada's article 'The Intelligentsia', Igor Kondakov wrote that the 'semantic structure of the intelligentsia … apart from its binary character, contains a tertiary element represented by the triangular relation of *people*, *authority* and *culture*'.[6]

Within the post-Soviet space, the notion of the *intelligent* became less distinct. As observed by Masha Gessen, the new Russia has found itself in search of new faith, be it religious or paranormal, of a new ideology, be it feminist or nationalist, and of new values. As of today, the notion of an *intelligent* (an individual representative of the intelligentsia) is undefined—and yet, as long as we read Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, argue with Berdyaev and Frank, relive and revive all of this intellectual (but also real) history, each of us has the opportunity to accompany Tolstoy in his moral introspection, and to find ways of resisting evil, aggression and hatred—not through further aggression and hatred, but through declining to partake in wars, ideological lies, and self-deception. What remains is a matter of our own imagination. *Individual* imagination.

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6 И.В. Кондаков, 'К феноменологии интеллигенции', Русская интеллигенция*:* история и судьба, 88.