



Review of: Olga Zhukova, *An essay on Russian culture: philosophy of history, literature and art*. Moscow: “Soglasie” Publisher house, 2019. 588 pages. Hardcover: ISBN 978-5-907038-50-9, € 17

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Abstract

This book review discusses the new research of the Russian philosopher and cultural study scholar Olga A. Zhukova. What is special about the Russian intellectual movement *Russian Europeanism*? Zhukova reconstructs the ideas of Russian Europeanism, and she evaluates the approaches of Russian thinkers to national cultural history. The author manages to introduce the reader to current discussions about the specifics of the Russian cultural and philosophical “project” and to propose new approaches for the interpretation of the intellectual and literary heritage of Russia. In addition to offering a critical analysis of Zhukova’s volume, the book review presents this thought provoking monograph as a great piece of scholarly work.

Keywords Philosophy of Russian culture · Philosophy of Russian history · Russian thought · Russian europeanism · Religiosity · Russian literature · Ideal-centric model

This new book by Russian philosopher and cultural historian Olga A. Zhukova continues her long standing study of the history of Russian philosophy and culture (see Zhukova 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017). The topic of this new monograph is the historical experience of Russia and the complex interplay between its cultural-political and spiritual-artistic traditions.

The central focus of Zhukova’s study is the issue of the *discovery of self-awareness* in Russian history and culture, posed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by authors (including emigrées) of the most influential and controversial Russian intellectual movement, namely, *Russian Europeanism*.

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The author of the 600-page volume endeavors to explicate, evaluate and categorize the approaches of Russian thinkers to national cultural history and the various ways they characterize Russian philosophy, culture, literature, and art. Zhukova sees her task “in identifying the genesis and continuity of the forms of cultural creativity, in understanding the spiritual and intellectual foundations of its traditions and practices” (p. 7). The author defines this intellectual procedure as “an analytical reconstruction of the social and spiritual history of Russia” (ibid.).

Zhukova understands “culture” as “the process of formation and transmission of social practices and structures of individual and collective consciousness with their own mechanism of self-organization and reproduction at the level of connotations and meanings” (p. 10). Conceiving “culture” in this way, she recognizes a certain similarity between her own definition and the concept of “semiosphere,” formulated by a prominent semiotician and cultural historian, Yuri M. Lotman. It is worth emphasizing in this regard that Zhukova’s book contains a significant amount of the author’s well-developed ideas, and its framework is based on her original philosophical concept of culture, which she prefers to call *ideal-centric*.

As Zhukova points out, its central tenet is that “culture is considered as a sum of individual and collective actions (acts) of sense-givings, which are the most common expressions of a person as an intelligent being, and which ensure the reproduction and development of a social community within the horizon of ideal notions of oneself” (p. 14). This allows the author to consider such cultural practices as religion, philosophy, literature, art, and science in their continuous interaction, and include spiritual (transcendental) ideals into the cultural horizon. The author’s approach corresponds significantly to the Russian spiritual and intellectual tradition with its special attention to the issues of religious metaphysics, to the identification of the key problem for European thought: the relationship between mind and faith.

Reconstructing the ideas of Russian Europeanism, Zhukova demonstrates both the virtuoso work of a scholar, masterfully working with various primary and secondary sources, and the high analytical ability of a philosophical theorist of culture. In tackling the complex issues of the history of Russian thought the author applies her original theoretical models and updated methodological tools, thereby providing not only an understanding of Russian culture as an “already established” phenomenon of history but also projecting its ongoing development.

Keeping at distance between the science and philosophy of Russian Europeanists, Zhukova insists that her interpretation is one of the possible ways to read Russian culture, in a way that is free from the tasks of advocacy and, even more so, apology for this line of national culture (p. 11). Zhukova certainly accomplishes her primary research aim very successfully, thus allowing for her monograph to be commended as a significant contribution to the study of Russian philosophy and culture and for placing this book among the leading ranks of the latest research on this subject (quite a limited number, I must say).

However, the intention of the book’s author is not limited to the task of creating a typological model of Russian culture as a mode of existence of the nation in history. First, Zhukova’s scholarly position and her historical–critical approach stand in sharp opposition to a variety of attempts to mythologize Russian culture as such. By removing rushed, superficial (and, in essence, politically dogmatic)

ideologemes that often accompany various discussions of Russian culture, the author manages to create a more accurate (and an even, level-headed) image of such a complex phenomenon as the Russian cultural and philosophical tradition, which remains in a constant process of self-identification and search for new affirmations of its “Russianness.”

Further, Zhukova’s book significantly expands the arsenal of conceptual and methodological tools for the establishment of a critical history of Russian thought and actualizes the discourse about Russian culture in the context of Modernity. The author manages to introduce the reader to current discussions about the specifics of the Russian cultural and philosophical “project” and, what is especially important, to propose new approaches for the interpretation of the intellectual and literary heritage of Russia. The significance of this book also lies in the fact that it further enriches and conceptualizes the language of description and interpretation, precisely “translating” the “archetypal” ideas and intuitions central to Russian thought into the language of contemporary philosophy, thus revealing their actual meaning.

The book itself is very ambitious. It conceptualizes key themes of Russian culture, formulated by Russian authors “as meaningful questions of national existence, historical creativity of the nation and spiritual self-improvement of the individual” (p. 2). The author specifically notes that it is not her intent to give a “ready-made” definition of Russian culture. Instead, she sees her goal as the clarification and reinterpretation of philosophical, artistic, and aesthetic narratives of national culture in the diverse creative work of “Russian Europeans.”

To accomplish this goal, Zhukova (who has already proved herself as a master of the “intellectual portrait”) turns to the analysis of the lives and intellectual legacies of the great Russian thinkers who, in their works, synthesized philosophical and literary ideas, often acting as practical politicians. Among them are Pyotr J. Chaadaev, Pyotr A. Vyazemsky, Alexander S. Pushkin, Alexander I. Herzen, Timofey N. Granovsky, Ivan S. Turgenyev, Nikolai G. Chernyshevsky, Vasily O. Klyuchevsky, Pyotr B. Struve, Vasily A. Maklakov, Semyon L. Frank, Boris P. Vysheslavtsev, Alexander N. Benois, Sergei P. Diaghilev, and Boris K. Zaitsev.

The first part of the book, “Philosophy of Russian History: Dilemmas of National Existence” (pp. 33–299), examines the most important philosophical and historical concepts of Russian thinkers and their specific takes on the problem of Russia and Europe. Of special interest in this section is an analysis of the concept of “Russian freedom” (in its various connotations), and a discussion of the religious roots of the confrontation between “autocratic” and “emancipatory” projects in Russian political history.

The heading of the second part of the book is “Russian Culture in Search of an Ideal: Literature and Art as an Experience of Philosophical Self-knowledge” (pp. 303–505). This section offers a philosophical reconstruction of the artistic, religious and political ideals of Russian culture in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, how they are expressed in the works of the writers, philosophers and artists of the Golden and Silver Age.

Viewed in its entirety, the book shows precisely how the ideal-axiological core of Russian culture really “works.” This “work,” according to Zhukova, takes place in the *hereditary continuity* of the social, historical and spiritual-creative experience,

including the conditions of powerful socio-cultural transformations of our time, which is convincingly demonstrated in the final section of the book (pp. 506–537).

The most significant and impressive feature of the book is its ability to view each of its many “characters” both as a “collector of Russian common cultural meanings” (Zhukova’s term) and as an acute, polemically charged author creating her own direction in the history of Russian culture and, in this way, testing Russian cultural integrity “to its breaking point.” It is indeed an intellectual pleasure to follow the author’s analytical thought, who looks at the twists and turns of life and creative searches of such different “Russian Europeans” as, for example, Chaadaev, Herzen, Struve, or Maklakov.

This is a highly informative and thought-provoking book, which I highly recommend to all specialists in Russian thought and culture. Everyone who wants to learn about Russian culture would benefit enormously from this book. It is a valuable and engaging contribution to the study of Russian philosophical and cultural tradition.

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