



Comments for the book symposium “*The Palgrave Handbook of Russian Thought*”

Lina Steiner¹ 

Accepted: 12 October 2022 / Published online: 21 November 2022
© The Author(s) 2022

Abstract

These are my comments and responses to questions and comments by my colleagues at the *Handbook* symposium that took place last fall.

Keywords Russian philosophy · Intellectual history · Feminism

First, I wanted to say a few words about the emergence of this volume. In 2017, we coorganized a conference, “Russian Thinkers Between the Revolution and Tradition,” which took place at the University of Bonn. A number of papers presented at this conference were later published in two special issues of *Studies in East European Thought* (2018, 70(4) and 2019, 71(1)). However, the dialog that began at this conference continued. In order to not lose the momentum, we decided to create a *Handbook of Russian Philosophical Thought*. We invited both the participants of our conference and a number of other scholars to contribute to this *Handbook*. In the course of our discussions and negotiations, we came to realize that the *Handbook* must include chapters on Russian philosophical poetry and literary prose, from Tolstoy and Dostoevsky to Mandelshtam, Platonov, and Nabokov. We also commissioned essays on major nineteenth-century critics like Belinsky and Chernyshevsky, and on the twentieth-century philosophers of literature, Bakhtin and Shpet. Last but not least, we felt obliged to include an essay on Yuri Lotman and the Moscow-Tartu School of Semiotics. Thanks to the financial support provided by Michael Forster’s Humboldt Professorship, we were able to hire professional translators, Peter Golub and Brad Damaré, who did a wonderful job translating ten essays from Russian. Thus, over time our volume grew thicker and thicker and transformed into a *Handbook of Russian Thought*.

From the outset, we did not aspire to create an encyclopedia of Russian thought. We did not have enough time and capacities to produce something so ambitious. What we wanted to create was a volume that would give the Anglophone public

✉ L. Steiner

¹ International Centre for Philosophy, University of Bonn, Poppelsdorfer Allee 28, 531215 Bonn, Germany

a good overview of some of the most influential trends and figures in the Russian intellectual tradition. It took us a while to determine how we wanted to structure this book. Originally, we wanted to structure it chronologically and divide it into periods. However, periodization is an interpretive approach. It implies some kind of master narrative. We could not agree on a single unifying narrative and opted instead for the simplest possible structure, which reflects the age-old genre distinction between “pure” philosophy and philosophical prose that takes the form of literature, literary, and art criticism. Although this binary is not devoid of interpretive sense, its historiological pretensions are minimal. We wanted to signal to the reader that we see Russia’s intellectual and cultural history as a dynamic and open-ended process.

When we set out to work on this volume our overall view of Russia’s cultural trajectory was optimistic. We were aware of many alarming tendencies in Russian intellectual life, such as the emergence of various reactionary movements and the spread of xenophobic and antiliberal ideas. However, we didn’t think that just a few years later freedom of thought and speech would once again be in jeopardy in Russia. The war in Ukraine has darkened my view of contemporary Russia. Personally, it is very difficult to remain hopeful about the society that acquiesces to dictatorship. When we began to work on this *Handbook*, we were hoping that the dialog between Russian scholars living in Russia and their Western counterparts, which emerged in the last thirty years, would become more energetic and productive in the coming years. Now, we can only hope that our Russian colleagues preserve at least a modicum of hope and manage to continue their work. I also hope that our Western colleagues do not turn away from their erstwhile interlocutors in Russia, do not leave them to their own devices, but look for new ways to exchange ideas and to collaborate. (I think that my coeditors have similar feelings, but I don’t want to speak for them about such a sensitive topic.) However, I still believe that genuine intellectual life has not been and will not be stifled in Russia, no matter how beleaguered, isolated, and impoverished Russian intellectuals (who are now living in Russia) will become in the coming years. I also think that modern media will make it easier for Russian intellectuals in the diaspora to stay in touch with their colleagues in Russia, as well as among themselves. As Russian intellectual history has often proved, the absence of political freedom is not always an impediment for the life of the mind. The spirit of opposition can be an excellent ferment for ideas. Thus, nineteenth and early twentieth-century semi-clandestine intellectual circles and Soviet-era dissident groups produced some of the most ground-breaking ideas and thinkers that Russia has contributed to the world.

Returning to our *Handbook*, there are several important areas that we unfortunately did not cover. The reason we have such gaps is that we could not find scholars who would contribute original essays on these topics on time. I especially regret that the *Handbook* does not directly address the issue of colonialism. (Although several chapters do touch upon this problem.) We do have a chapter on Nikolai Gogol, an author who grew up bilingual and whose hybrid cultural identity has been recently discussed in several excellent monographs. I wish we had found contributors to discuss other examples of cultural hybridity in both Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. In contemporary Western scholarship more and more attention is being given to the former colonies of the Russian Empire, including those that have already become decolonized and emerged as nation-states, as well as those that are still part of the

Russian Federation. There is also a lot of good Western scholarship on the culture of ethnic and religious minorities, including Jewish, Roma, and other cultures. It is unfortunate that these topics remained uncovered in the *Handbook*.

Anne Eakin Moss has pointed out that our *Handbook* also lacks a chapter on the “woman question.” In response to her, I can say that we did try to find scholars who would write about such figures as Princess Dashkova, Elena Blavatsky, Maria Yudina, and Marxist women intellectuals, but ultimately failed to recruit anyone. (Fortunately, the chapter on Alexei Losev mentions Maria Yudina and Losev’s novel *The Woman Thinker* that she inspired.) Had there been a sizable tradition of feminist criticism in Russia, we would have included it in our volume, but to the best of my knowledge, Russian feminism (as an intellectual movement) was a rather short-lived phenomenon which ended in the 1920s. From that point on, Soviet people were taught to regard gender equality as a *fait accompli*.

On a more personal note, I confess that I also took gender equality for granted until I found out (from a female senior colleague at a top American University) that in the US, women are still very often paid less than their male colleagues for doing the same work. This was a shock to me. I grew up in the Soviet Union. My mother and both of my grandmothers worked throughout their lives and were awarded various prizes, medals, and honorary titles. One of my great aunts was a judge. Another served as the head of a major chemical laboratory. I have never seen their pay slips, but I always had the impression that they were never discriminated against because of their gender. If they experienced discrimination, it was because of their Jewish “nationality” (i.e., ethnic origin). I don’t claim that my childhood impressions accurately reflect reality. Like most Soviet people, I grew up in a bubble and was not trained to think critically. Only when I moved to the US in the 1990s did I encounter the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous, Toril Moi, and other feminist thinkers whose ideas transformed my outlook and made me understand the depth and complexity of the “woman question.” Have these feminist writers had a similar effect on Russian scholars who continue to live and work in Russia? Have Western feminists contributed to a revival of the Russian feminist tradition? Are there any ongoing feminist discussions in contemporary Russia? Such discussions may have taken place and are possibly still underway in Russia, but they were not on our radar when we planned this *Handbook*.

The situation is completely different in the West. Feminism has long been regarded as a major discourse or research field throughout the humanities, law, and social sciences. The robust Anglophone tradition of feminist criticism includes a number of Slavic scholars. In recent years the books of some of these scholars have been translated and published in Russia. This would have certainly had an impact on the intellectual community and civil society at large. However, a new iron curtain is now descending across the Russian media, helping the antiliberal forces to spread their influence, stifling the voices of feminists, queer theorists, and representatives of various cultural minorities. Given these developments, it is all the more important for those scholars who are enjoying liberal freedoms afforded by the Western academia to recover and study Russia’s marginalized thinkers. We are currently planning a new collection of essays, where we will give sufficient attention to the topics and figures that we failed to include in the *Handbook*.

To conclude, our main goal in publishing this *Handbook* was not to provide a full coverage of the Russian intellectual history, but to stimulate a mutually enlightening intellectual exchange between Russian and Anglophone scholars. At present, this goal seems utterly unrealistic. We can hardly hope that live exchange will become more vibrant than it was in the last thirty years. The most we can hope for is that it does not peter out. This will require additional efforts, but I am sure that there will always be enough enthusiasts on both sides who would remain open-minded and promote further research and dialog between Russia and the West.

Funding Note Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Declarations

Competing Interests There is no conflict of interests.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.