



Contemplating the legacy of Russian thought amidst tragedy: an introduction to *The Palgrave Handbook of Russian Thought* book symposium

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Every book demands a profound commitment from its readers, extending beyond the simple act of reading. According to the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, a text is inherently a paradigm of action. This goes beyond the reader's essential interpretative activity in pursuit of understanding; it chiefly involves the text's capacity to prompt the reader's self-transformation by evoking the imaginative perspectives. As an autonomous source of potential meaning, the text not only discloses the intention to project a world but also aids in self-understanding. Our approach to the text becomes a moment of philosophical reflection, exerting an influence not only on the unfamiliar (the world), but also on the self, becoming the focus of hermeneutic exercise and the subject of knowledge.

The text in focus in the present book symposium is *The Palgrave Handbook of Russian Thought*—an expansive volume consisting of over 800 pages and featuring 36 original essays.¹ These essays deeply engage with various figures, topics, and facets of Russian thought across a distinct period in the country's intellectual history. Spanning from the late eighteenth century to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and beyond—i.e., roughly from the inception of a distinct Russian philosophical tradition to the resurgence of philosophical reflection in the post-Soviet era—this time represents a profoundly intricate and active phase in Russia's history.

“The world,” in which this text delves, is the rich Russian intellectual tradition presented in its massive and remarkably complex landscape. This complexity makes navigation and understanding challenging, not only for newcomers but for all engaged in the study. The intricacy of Russian thought is manifested in the sophisticated connections of philosophy with literature, politics, and the arts, adding layers

¹*The Palgrave Handbook of Russian Thought*. Eds. Marina F. Bykova, Michael N. Forster, and Lina Steiner. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. xxviii, 814 pp. Hardcover, \$155.99.

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of depth to this vast tradition. The *Handbook* serves as a guide for readers, helping them traverse this exceptionally multifaceted terrain. It not only acknowledges the nuances of an ever-evolving philosophical and intellectual context but also explores various domains of thought within the Russian tradition, illustrating their dynamic interconnections. Furthermore, the *Handbook* reconstructs central narratives of this tradition, narratives that continue to hold relevance in contemporary global intellectual discourse, thus offering a rich resource for philosophical contemplation and self-understanding.

Most essays in this cluster arose from a roundtable discussion at NYU's Jordan Center in late October 2021, coinciding with the *Handbook's* publication.² The roundtable expanded beyond merely discussing the book itself. Esteemed experts—Caryl Emerson, Mikhail Epstein, and Anne Eakin Moss—who served as the invited commentators, alongside contributors and other prominent scholars, delved into the vast realm of Russian intellectual heritage, albeit not exhaustively covered in the *Handbook*. The volume garnered considerable attention beyond the event. Field experts, emerging authors, and readers keen on Russian thought and cultural tradition engaged in various conversations about the figures and topics covered in the volume. The book sparked discussions at numerous conferences and received detailed reviews in key journals, lauded for “the diversity of authors and topics, the fact that each chapter can be read by itself or in dialogue with others, and the sheer enormity of knowledge contained within” (DeBlasio 2022, p. 814; see also Osovsky et al. 2022, p. 267). Several entries in this cluster stemmed from these later discussions and subsequent reflections.

The overwhelmingly positive response to the *Handbook's* publication and its enthusiastic reception sparked a keen interest in sustaining scholarly conversations about Russian thought, necessary for gaining a more profound comprehension of the often tumultuous evolution of Russian intellectual thought over the last few centuries. This enthusiasm has driven the SEET editorial team to arrange a journal symposium that delves into the *Handbook's* themes and related content.

Admittedly, the publication of the book symposium encountered significant delays. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces on February 24, 2022, not only divided the perception of reality into “before” and “after” but also drastically reshaped the global view of Russia and its intellectual and cultural heritage. In the wake of this tragic event, the journal and its contributors to this project had to pause the book symposium, affected by the irrationality and devastation of the bloody war, even if indirectly. This aggression inflicts immense human suffering on the people of Ukraine and also leads to lasting—unfortunately, largely irreversible—damage to Russia as a country (which should not be equated with the state) and its intellectual legacy. Since the start of the Russo-Ukraine war, references to Russian thought have taken on a somber tone. Ongoing debates question whether Russian culture and philosophy should be annulled (“cancelled”) and its legacy erased. The

²On behalf of the *Handbook's* contributors and editors, I extend our heartfelt appreciation to the Jordan Center and all affiliated scholars and staff for hosting the insightful roundtable discussion of our book. This gathering served as the book's initial—though informal—presentation, offering a highly enlightening discourse on its conceptual content and closely related topics. The organizers kindly recorded the event, and the video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFJgkqEtZwU>.

regime under Putin has openly exploited Russian thought and prominent thinkers to serve its imperial ambitions, instrumentalizing and weaponizing the country's intellectual and cultural heritage. Through this manipulation, the regime validates what Lev Gudkov terms "recurring totalitarianism" within the nation's borders, glorifies anti-civilizational hostility on the global stage, and seeks to justify the ongoing war in Ukraine as "just," "liberating," and patriotic.

This disconcerting development underscores the critical relevance and timeliness of discussing Russian thought in the present context. There is an urgent need for a thorough reassessment of the Russian tradition, examining the ideas and themes exploited by the current regime for aggressive purposes. We must identify and subject to stern criticism those insights and beliefs that may serve as a platform for recurring ethno-nationalism, messianic exceptionalism, and imperial ambitions of domination.

The essays presented in this book symposium stand as the authors' effort to initiate this conversation, offering a modest yet valuable contribution to this important reevaluation project.

Declarations

Competing Interests The author declares no competing interests.

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