

A ROSICRUCIAN UTOPIA IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY RUSSIA

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The Masonic Circle of N.I. Novikov

By

Raffaella Faggionato

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 Springer

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A Note on Spelling

In reporting in the Russian language the eighteenth-century sources, I have adjusted the spelling to the present day Russian, in order to make the reading of the texts easier, the interest of which, in the context of my work, is more historical than philological.

I have, however, kept the syntactic and lexical characteristics of the original.

The transliteration of the Russian, both in the text and in the bibliography, uses the Library of Congress system. Only a few very well known names have been Anglicised, for example those of the emperors. For easier reading, I have translated in the English text the names of lodges and associations and the titles of the quoted works and reviews, citing in parenthesis the original name or title only at first mention.

All dates are given according to the Julian calendar, in force in Russia until 1918, which in the eighteenth century lagged behind the Gregorian calendar by eleven days.

Preface

According to the Western historiographical consensus, the Enlightenment developed “naturally” out of a tradition rooted in Renaissance Humanism, the Protestant Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. If the Enlightenment is defined as the conviction that individual reason and responsible effort will result in the material progress and political liberalisation of society, the historiographical consensus is clearly convincing, and the evidence marshalled in its support quite compelling. However, it does fail to account for the persistent manifestations of spiritual and emotional (i.e. religious and traditionalist) commitments that are observed among most cultures of the modern West. We need only to recall the ongoing importance of religious and church life, as well as the influence of the aesthetics of romanticism and the metaphysics of idealism, not to speak of the emotions of nationalism or historicising nostalgia. Moreover, the Enlightenment never lacked outright enemies and critics from its own midst calling attention to the importance of the emotional and spiritual components of human nature.

It is, therefore, not surprising that in recent decades scholars have also turned their attention and energy to tracking and elucidating those manifestations and ideas that serve as counterpoints to the dominant conception of an eighteenth-century “rationalist, individualist, and materialist” Enlightenment. This is not the place for a comprehensive account of the “revisionist” interpretation of the eighteenth century. Let me only list some of the questions that have been the object of recent research on the intellectual history of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; discovery and reinterpretations of the esoteric and mystical aspects of the Scientific Revolution; the spiritualist trends in the social and moral philosophies of the eighteenth century and their implementation by Free Masons, educators, and writers; efforts at introducing a “modernism” into Church life and teaching (both Catholic and Protestant); the formation of a “counter Enlightenment” and its impact on “public opinion”.

In the case of Russia in the eighteenth century we may observe some similar trends; but the context there was quite different. The most significant aspect of the Russian context, to my mind, is the quite rapid and massive importation of contemporary Western European cultures, largely imposed from above by autocratic decree. It started, as we now know, in the second half of the seventeenth century, gingerly promoted by Tsar Alexis and his entourage, in the wake of the challenge to the ritual reforms of Patriarch Nikon by the Old Believers and because of pressing military needs. It resulted in the importation to Muscovy of clergy and pedagogues

from Ukraine, Byelorussia, and the Near East who took commanding positions in the cultural life of the Tsar's realm.

On top of this, the energetic and ruthless Europeanisation, imposed by Peter the Great, created a climate of intellectual and socio-cultural insecurity and disorientation for the country's elites, both lay and ecclesiastical. Their sense of instability and confusion was further heightened and prolonged not only by the rapidity and brutality with which Emperor Peter I imposed foreign innovations in many domains at once, but also because they came, so to speak, ready made, *en bloc*. The inner articulations of the novelties, and their relationship to their original intellectual and cultural framework, were neither perceived, nor fully understood by the Russians who had to acquire and make use of them. Unsurprisingly, it was to take the remainder of the eighteenth century, the era of the philosophic Enlightenment in the West, for Russian elite society to assimilate fully Peter's program of Europeanisation.

A major aspect of this process of integration involved the comprehension and assimilation of the philosophic presuppositions and spiritual values that were at the core of contemporary Western civilisation. In a way, indeed, the dominant *leitmotif* of Western European philosophic speculation throughout the seventeenth century had been the relationship of faith and reason, or between religion and science. The tension created by this problem accompanied Russia's Europeanisation, albeit with close to a century-long delay, and under much less political glare. No wonder, therefore, that the story of this facet of Russia's "westernisation" (or "modernisation") could not be adequately researched and told until the first breach in the autocratic regime in 1905. Nor were the *intelligentsia*, fighting the autocracy in the name of secular progress and political liberalism, at all concerned with this issue. While to the Soviet system anything dallying with religion and spiritualism in a positive light was abhorrent as a matter of principle.

All of which goes a long way to explain the historiographical neglect of Free Masonry, Rosicrucianism, and the spiritualist impulses in eighteenth century Russia; even though, arguably, they were the first expressions of a socially concerned public opinion among Russian society striving to lead along the path of moral and material progress. True, the first steps to filling this historiographical blank spot were taken in the two decades preceding the revolution of 1917. These efforts were in part continued by scholars in emigration, and their pupils, during the existence of the Soviet Union. But only historiographical impulses from the West, along with freer access to the sources, during and after the disintegration of Soviet Russia, have made possible the serious study of the hidden facets of Russia's Westernisation in the eighteenth century, and, in particular, of its crucial, culminating episode – N. I. Novikov's enterprises devoted to moral proselytising, publishing, and philanthropy in the reign of Catherine II.

Professor Raffaella Faggionato's magisterial study is the first, and for the foreseeable future definitive, study of the much too long neglected spiritual aspect of Russia's entry into the world of Western Enlightenment. By evoking both the European background and Russian context, Professor Faggionato clearly shows the depth and complexity of both. To do this she judiciously draws on all recent scholarship dealing with the ideas and practices of Free Masonry, as well as with the philosophic and religious ambiguities of the "scientific revolution" of the sixteenth – seventeenth centuries in Europe. For the intellectual history of the eighteenth century Russia she

has marshalled all the existing historiography and also delved, with discrimination and care, into the rich, and heretofore largely unexplored, archival documentation. In so doing she also underlines the importance of the contribution made by the German spiritual tradition for the development of modern Russian culture – a fact that is still insufficiently recognised, both in Russia and the West.

Drawing a comprehensive and convincing picture of Russia's assimilation of contemporary Western intellectual values and traditions, Professor Faggionato offers some telling overall conclusions: the process of Europeanisation, forcefully initiated by Peter the Great, coming on top of the church crisis of the eighteenth century, resulted in an intellectual disorientation of the elites that threatened both the social and political system. Masonic lodges and mystically oriented circles of the nobility sought ways to reform and stability by blending traditional Christian spirituality with scientific insight into the workings of Nature. Rosicrucian hermeticism and esoterism were ready to offer them guidance on this path. N. I. Novikov translated their message into a practical program of material and intellectual transformation, which was to lead to individual spiritual illumination and synergy with God. The ecclesiastical authorities in St Petersburg interpreted his activities, especially his publication of German mystical literature in translation, as a direct and dangerous threat to popular faith and to Orthodoxy. Catherine II decided it was politic to put an end to Novikov's enterprises and remove him from public sight.

Professor Faggionato's splendid research accomplishes more than making us aware of an important, albeit neglected, facet of modern Russia's intellectual history in the eighteenth century. Her thorough presentation and sophisticated analysis of the complex interplay between Western European and traditional native components of the eighteenth century Russian culture gives new and challenging insight into the dynamics of modern Russian culture. Indeed, how can we begin to make sense of such features of the nineteenth and early twentieth century (and beyond them in our own days) as the government reforms of Alexander I and Alexander II, the Slavophile controversy, conservative nationalism on the eve of the revolution (and today as well), the impact of writers like Dostoevsky and Tolstoi (and many others), the special features of Russian science and scholarship, and the nature of the Silver Age, if we ignore the "enlightened Rosicrucianism", as represented by Novikov and his circle? This is the key issue of Raffaella Faggionato's important book – a must for all those interested in modern Russia and its culture!

Marc Raeff

Introduction

The Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross exists in Russia so far as was revealed and known to me as an initiate of the lower degrees. Its aim consists in an understanding of God through an awareness of nature and oneself, following the teachings of Christian morals.

N.I. Novikov

During the eighteenth century, Russia first came into contact with the cultural context of Western Europe showing its own contradictory yet captivating identity. At this time more than ever, Russia, which represented the disquieting frontier between East and West, a place where two mental universes intersected, revealed its extraordinary capacity to absorb, rework and put into practice the experiences which had evolved in other historical and geographic contexts. This made it possible for seemingly irreconcilable cultural influences to converge allowing Russia to create its own cultural horizon based on an eclecticism at times paradoxical.

By establishing contacts with Western intellectual life in this crucial period for its development, Tsarist Russia was able to assimilate from this great wealth of ideas and social customs both the old and the new. What other countries were leaving behind was just as stimulating and disruptive as what lay ahead. The image of the two-faced Janus can be applied to eighteenth-century Russia: it was as exhilarated by the old as it was enthusiastic about the new.

Nikolai Ivanovich Novikov and the circle of intellectuals who gathered round him are among the most typical representatives of that era: they embodied its idea of spiritual restlessness and they sought alternatives to the narrow reality of those times, of the autocratic State, of the close-minded xenophobic Church and of a society that was in a shambles after the loss of its traditional mentality which had been overwhelmed by the Petrine reforms.

The protagonists acted in the milieu surrounding the University of Moscow at the end of the century. It represented an environment that was both lively and open; it was a carefree island in the heart of the sleepy former capital far from the Court and Catherine the Great's watchful eyes. At the university, Russian and foreign professors enjoyed great freedom of movement: they lectured on constitutional law, philosophy, German, Latin and Greek literature to a diversified public consisting of students, novice writers and aspiring journalists as well as aristocrats who were craving after new ideas.

As a writer, journalist and publisher of great renown, Nikolai Ivanovich typified the progressive intellectual of the Age of Enlightenment. He was among the first people in Russia to welcome the wave of new ideas originating in the West. During his thirty-year career in writing and publishing, the articles contained in his journals disseminated the themes and values of civil rights, constitutionalism, tolerance,

freedom of thought and speech, physiocracy and respect for the rights of the individual. He was an Enlightenment thinker and hence a typical representative of his era.

However, this clear image becomes confused and its outlines deformed if we leaf through the pages of his journals, periodicals, essays and treatises (whose title page all include the famous “N.N.” trademark) which characterized the development of Moscow thought and cultural life during the last 25 years of the eighteenth century. First, we discover that he was a Freemason, as were many of his contributors and all of the associates of his Typographical Company. This is, in fact, the first crack in the monolithic image that we were expecting to find. But it can be easily explained, as most eighteenth-century intellectuals belonged to the Order of the Freemasons, many of whom used the international channels and the protection of their initiation to disseminate the ideals of Reason and Enlightenment.

If we delve further into his writings, however, rather embarrassing questions of interpretation begin to emerge. The many volumes and journals edited by the Friendly Learned Society, of which Novikov was the lifeblood, make reference to a tradition of thought very different from that of Reason and Enlightenment. The typical tones of Enlightenment satire, the mockery of the vices of the period, and the proud vindication of individual dignity are superimposed upon by mystical tones, deep religious inspiration, a call for inner analysis and spiritual rebirth. If we look at the most successful titles we can encounter catechisms, lives of the Saints and treatises on alchemy next to books by Voltaire and Montesquieu and other important authors of the Enlightenment. Moreover, if we look at the manuscripts reserved for the members of the circle our disorientation grows, when faced with the translations of Böhme and the classics of late-Renaissance Hermeticism.

We may thus ask the question if this was a sect of *illuminati* or a circle of the Enlightenment? Did they cultivate politico-social commitment or a desire for spiritual reform? The problem becomes even more complicated with the discovery that Novikov and his brothers were affiliated with the Brotherhood of the Golden-Rose Cross, an occult branch of Western freemasonry that had given voice to its most “reactionary and obscurantist” aspect.

Yet the Russian Brothers of the Golden-Rose Cross were anything but reactionary and obscurantist. Indeed, they criticized the errors, confusion, superficiality, corruption and manners of their contemporaries. This was not so much a matter of their rejecting modernity as it was their denouncing the shadows which obscured its shining path.

In the West, during the eighteenth century, Freemasonry was also characterized by ambiguity and contradiction. Throughout the century the versatility of its associative model made it possible for the most varied and often contrasting cultural stimuli to find acceptance. Freemasonry exemplified not only the values of scientific rationalism, constitutionalism and moderate and tolerant reasonableness but also the spirit of preservation and the desire to salvage an idealistic past. The image of the rebuilding of Solomon’s Temple in accordance with the best analogical tradition contains a number of interwoven meanings which are linked by the common desire to recover a lost dimension: the state of the universe and man before his “Fall”. Furthermore, the allegory of the Temple is placed beside that of the search for the Golden Fleece or the Magnum Opus according to a principle of assimilation and contamination among parallel esoteric traditions common to all historical periods but particularly evident in Europe of the Enlightenment.¹ As G. Giarrizzo writes: “For the Freemason the most

important thing was the end result which in the eighteenth century corresponded to mankind's regeneration, betterment, liberation and happiness: the Light vanquishing the darkness induced for the most part by human error and guilt. The procedures through which this result was assured were varied yet relevant and might include magical or magical-alchemical techniques or theurgies."² Thus, a final common objective allowed quite different cultural trends and often opposed political alignments to coexist in a stormy relationship which ranged from polemics to severing conflicts within the same organisation.

Cosmopolitanism, tolerance, the elimination of social injustice, the struggle against government and Orthodox-religious tyranny and the guarantee of individual rights were included among the values that characterized the spirit of the times. The Western Brothers of the Golden-Rose Cross also made sporadic forays into this field although they generally remained opposed to the establishment of an Enlightenment that criticized and demolished all certainties. In the West the occasional intertwining of various cultural trends allows us nevertheless to detect distinct opposing areas and alignments. At the time when the Order of the Golden-Rose Cross was flourishing the confrontation between its most typical representative, Johann Christoph Wöllner, and champions of the German Enlightenment such as Christoph Friedrich Nicolai, was explicit and the division irreparable. Although both of these men were affiliated with the Masonic Order they represented two distinct currents.

On the contrary, the Muscovite Brothers of the Golden-Rose Cross participated in both of these currents even though they were bound to the Berlin authorities of the Order by the vow of Masonic subordination and loyalty. For them, the ideological battles between rival lodges and systems occurring in the other European countries represented a distant and incomprehensible reality. From their point of view there was no conflict among the various cultural influences, just as long as everything was aimed at the pursuit of the Truth, which was inevitably unique.

Novikov and his associates were deeply and painfully aware of Russia's backwardness and they drew from the West a strong conviction that culture was an important factor in transforming reality. The seventeenth-century Rosicrucian legacy and its ideal of a "General reform of divine and human things" found fertile ground in this discontentment with the present. Paracelsian philosophy, mystical and alchemical treatises and hermetic disciplines, which had been brought to Russia through the international circuits established by the Freemasons, were hailed by these progressive intellectuals with both their feet planted firmly in the modern world. For them this was not just a question of survival but also of discovery. For this was a new universe of ideas that was bursting open and would not be quashed by their comparison to paradigms that were stronger and more suitable to the times. Therefore, this process represented not a contradiction but rather an eclecticism that would turn out to be extremely productive.

The absence in Russia of a modern social and economic structure as well as a culture that justified and legitimized it and the absence of a wide-spread secular and technical-scientific mindset facilitated this complex process of assimilation. Nevertheless, the "General reform" that the Rosicrucians attempted to initiate in Moscow did not follow the same guidelines as those indicated by Western culture. Instead, the first steps of this reform were characterized by a rediscovery of Orthodox spirituality re-examined in the light of Rosicrucian utopianism on the one hand and

the values of the Enlightenment on the other.

Even though Russia required ideals and ethical principles so that it could establish new models of behaviour, such ideals and principles had to be sought and recognized in its own roots. Russian culture was deeply rooted in Orthodoxy with which there was no desire to break. On the contrary, in their activities and choices the Rosicrucians made a conscious attempt to redeem this religious tradition. They drew from this tradition the shades which could give prominence and depth to the human model proposed by them as an example of a possible alternative to the ones imposed elsewhere. Thus, the Russian Rosicrucians attempted to formulate a vision of the world and, in particular, an image of man in which the acquisitions of contemporary political and philosophical thought were interwoven with a “Genuine” religious dimension. This, in turn, was the result of a dialogue between Hermeticism and Orthodox Christianity.

The Russian Rosicrucians evoked philosophers and theologians from the present and past to provide life models and theoretical assumptions that needed to be confronted. It was on the basis of these examples that they could begin the formulation of their own cultural dimension. It was necessary for them to find a way to re-establish man’s communion with nature and God, to return to Unity and to put the pieces back together. In this light, the differences between the Christian message and ancient wisdom rooted in Egyptian Paganism, in Renaissance Pantheism and heretical Mysticism were negligible.

Russian Rosicrucianism was to reveal exactly what Russian Enlightenment shared with the Western Enlightenments, what Russian culture absorbed from *Enlightenment*, *Aufklärung*, *lumières*, and what characterized *russskoe prosveshchenie*, making it a separate phenomenon. Philosophical and religious movements that ran parallel in eighteenth-century European culture became so intertwined and confused in their Russian context that they created a cultural product with anomalous yet highly original features. Among the coexisting issues of the Moscow Circle’s world vision we can find Hermetic themes, modern thought, libertarian and democratic demands, Mysticism, Orthodoxy, Rational Scepticism, loyalty towards institutions and the need for a radical reform of the Church and society, culture and religion. They were all put into daily practice, a fact that was to have a profound influence on the history of ideas in Russia.

The activities proposed by Nikolai Novikov’s circle addressed a wide range of initiatives and fields of interest. There emerged an ideal of a man committed to a fairer society through a sweeping project to completely refound society, beginning with a reconstitution of cosmic harmony. The responsibility for this reconstitution, a duty assigned by God, represents the dignity of the Rosicrucians whose choice of lifestyle already heralded this possible new world.

This explanation helps us to understand why the members of Novikov’s circle considered themselves with regard to the world of lodges, an independent “Inner Order”. As “Monks in the world” their mission extended well beyond the customary moralization programme proposed by the Masonic catechisms. Similarly, this can also explain why we can find “Secret” translations of Hermetic texts side by side with publications advocating a modern-style culture. On the one hand there was the esoteric tradition permeated with religiousness which was the guardian of knowledge and mystery that could be accessed only by the few men who undertook a long project of research. On the other hand, there were the achievements of modern thought,

the ideas of the Encyclopaedists, political and scientific debate as well as literary experimentation. The individual features of each of these various aspects can be fully understood only by considering them complementary with the other features and by placing them within the rich framework of Orthodoxy.

The Moscow Circle reacted to this need of reconciliation and restoration of lost harmony by actively conceiving faith as something experienced through everyday life. Indeed, in accordance with Orthodox tradition the true theologian “Does not meditate but changes himself”³ and he also transforms the world around him. The Rosicrucians’ complex connection with the present and utopia was reflected in the relationship that exists between manuscript and book. The richness of the Rosicrucian message lies precisely in this ambiguity, in this oscillation between the present and the ideal and by drawing inspiration from this ideal world, present-day problems can be solved.

This type of message thoroughly satisfied the needs of eighteenth-century Russian intellectuals who sought religious justification for public involvement and some sort of religious basis that could uplift their own dignity and their will to change the social situation. Thus, it also fulfilled their desire to find both meaning and unity in the ideological chaos of the times, as well as a harmony in the complexity of a human and natural universe shaken by the upheavals of the Modern Age.

Enlightenment thinkers are typically portrayed as men who were committed to the causes of making mankind independent of historical tradition and replacing religious creeds with a faith in progress. The inspiration for this progress was to be found in human reason that, at long last, had been unfettered from the chains of restrictive doctrine. However, such an image does not fit in with the endeavours of these learned men of eighteenth-century Russia who lived for and defended, in any field, independence and freedom of expression because of an ethical-religious necessity which was a far cry from the secular spirit of the new Western society. Moreover, these men promoted the emancipation of the individual from any principle of authority but in light of a rediscovery of a spiritual dimension. In this way, they set off a process that was contrary to the one that in other countries led to the complete secularization of culture, life and society. In Russia this process could be defined as the resacralization of culture, life and the world; it represented the rehabilitation of the symbolic and religious sources of human thought.

In the West the various forms taken on by religious reformism, which originated from an essentially heterodox spirituality, had always had to face the attacks of political and ecclesiastic institutions. These institutions were well organized and united in their struggle against any display of heresy. In Tsarist Russia, on the other hand, there was no alliance between Church and State and their representatives were from the very beginnings both disorientated and incapable of fathoming the threat to order and stability concealed behind the myth of Christian Rosenkreuz. Thus, the Brothers of the Golden-Rose Cross had at their disposal a decade of extreme liberty to act as they saw fit. Subsequently, however, when the clergy realized the devastating effects that such actions were having on Russian society, they immediately sought the support of the Court. When Catherine the Great understood that this new religious moral code could have destabilizing effects and that it was capable of destroying presumably inviolable behavioural patterns, she could no longer allow herself to be as tolerant as

she had once been.

At this point, the Rosicrucians relinquished their posts in the army and administration. They lived far removed from established institutions and they created their own educational facilities, printing works, public libraries and pharmacies. Furthermore, they were scornful of the role of Courtier and life of the Court in general with its behavioural patterns and social values modeled on the West. The Circle's meetings had their own rituals and symbols which replaced those of ecclesiastical liturgy. In this strange blend of Enlightenment coterie and religious community the Rosicrucian brother goes to confession, seeks God in the Rose and the Cross and finds Him within himself and his own dignity as a subject who acts independently and makes his own choices. A brother's personal journey could not be kept in check, as it was completely free from the control of State and Church institutions. As soon as the two powers were faced with this threat to the *status quo* they rediscovered their lost harmony and learned how to act together to put an end to this promised Rosicrucian utopia.

NOTES

¹ Cf. H. Leventhal, *In the Shadow of Enlightenment* (New York, 1976); H. Corbin, *Temple et contemplation* (Paris, 1980); A. Faivre, "Le Temple de Solomon dans la théosophie maçonnique", *Australian Journal of French Studies* (1972), n. 3, pp. 274–289.

² G. Giarrizzo, *Massoneria e illuminismo nell'Europa del Settecento* (Venice, 1994), p. 419.

³ P. Evdokimov, *L'Orthodoxie* (Paris, 1959), p. 76.

Part I

Moscow has to this day remained the bearded Russian, while Petersburg has become the neat and tidy German [...] Moscow is the old housewife. She prepares blini, looks from afar and listens to the stories about what's happening in the world without stirring from her chair. Petersburg, the sprightly fellow that he is, never sits at home, always dresses up, so that he can show off to Europe and exchange bows with those people on the other side of the sea [...] Moscow is the Russian nobleman, and if you're going to have fun, why not do it until you drop, and don't worry if you've already spent more than you've got in your pocket. For Moscow it's all the way or nothing.

N. Gogol'