

A New Creed for Russians?

The Ideas of the Neo-Slavophiles

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Neo-slavophilism is a system of ideas which may well supplant a moribund Marxism-Leninism in the Soviet Union. The neo-slavophil creed is a contemporary restatement of the ideas of certain 19th century Russian thinkers about Russia's historical destiny and religious calling. It emphasizes nationalism, moral integrity, patriarchalism and Russian Orthodox Christianity. Stalin died in 1953, and in 1956 Khrushchev initiated a de-stalinisation campaign which exploded the myth of Stalin's moral and doctrinal infallibility, in which a whole generation of Russians had been taught to believe. The ideological vacuum which resulted, combined with campaigns against religion (particularly in 1959-64), has helped create a large following since the 1960s for neo-slavophilism.

In the political field, neo-slavophil ideas have been embodied in the programme of the "All-Russian Social-Christian Union for the Liberation of the People" (VSKhSON). This revolutionary organization was founded in 1964 and dissolved in 1967 when its leaders were arrested. As for ideology, the *samizdat* journal *Veche* has made a significant contribution. Its title refers to the popular assembly of medieval Russia. Ten issues of the journal appeared between 1971-74. Its editor was M. N. Osipov, who welcomed contributions to *Veche* from slavophiles of all persuasions.

The basic beliefs of the neo-slavophiles stem from the assumption that Russia has a peculiar destiny. The Soviet system must not be replaced, therefore, by political and social structures copied from those of the Western democracies. Rather, it must be transformed through critical self-examination and by a reawakening of the spiritual potential of the "people" (*narod*), which centuries of oppression have stultified. Only thus will Russia at last fulfil her spiritual destiny.

History and Metahistory

Like their 19th century intellectual ancestors, contemporary slavophiles stress that the course of Russian history has been different from that of other countries. Its contradictions and perversities have not arisen be-

cause of a lack of Western enlightenment and reason, but are a function of its dual nature. For Russian history is a blend of *History* (an objective succession of events) and of *Metahistory* (the unfolding of the religious destiny of the Russian nation). "History is not merely an 'extension' of nature," writes one slavophil, "but it carries within itself the heavenly sphere—the world of eternal values and lofty ideals." To "experience history" means to understand it not only as something given (a collection of historical facts) but as a great creative duty and task. Russian history is for slavophiles a process of Christian revelation. They frequently compare Russia's present situation with the day of the Crucifixion. The situation seems hopeless, but resurrection is firmly promised. "Orthodox Russia," one writer declares, "has reached its Golgotha, and has been crucified . . . and now, we believe, the hour approaches for the glorious and terrible resurrection. . . . the nations of the earth shall watch in consternation as light pours out of the East."⁶ According to Fr. Dmitri Dudko, Mauriac believes that a light of hope for the future shines only in Russia. "And why?" asks Fr. Dmitri. "Because Golgotha is in Russia, and where there is Golgotha there is also resurrection."⁷

The Russian nation is, for slavophiles, a "God-bearing" nation. The author of the anonymous article, "Notes from a Russian Christian", claims that "In the Russian land, as philosophers assert, atheism becomes a faith . . .", and this is because Russia is essentially a religious land. "Whoever lives in Russia is automatically seized by religious forces."⁸ G. M. Shimanov in his recent article, "The Ideal State", assumes that history allows only those institutions to exist which fit into a predetermined plan for human history. He sees the Soviet State as an indispensable stage on the way towards the ideal Christian State. In a letter supporting his article he writes:

The whole history of Soviet power . . . is a growing consciousness of the limitations of both the Christian thesis and the communist antithesis; and a preparation for the coming synthesis, which will be completely Christian. . . . The Soviet power is not a simple phenomenon . . . but complex and full of contradictions (it is pregnant with *Theocracy* and pregnant things are not usually very beautiful). . . I believe that the nature of Soviet power is not in the least satanic, but human, capable of sin but also capable of repentance and of great service to God and man.

The Spiritual Power of the "People"

The Russian Intelligentsia, which in the 19th century espoused various forms of Western radicalism and struggled with the autocracy, always

felt uneasily that it knew nothing of the "people" for whose liberation it was fighting. Slavophiles, however, have always believed that the "people" possesses the spiritual power of true Russian Orthodoxy, and that once this potential force is activated Russia will be transformed.

The word *muzhik* (peasant) is used by slavophiles as a term of approval to describe anyone who cares about "Holy Russia". Those who look for ideological and artistic inspiration or for social and political models outside Russia, and in particular those who seek to imitate the West, are condemned as *bespochvenny* ("not grounded in the Russian soil"). L. Ibragimov, attacking some articles by non-slavophile dissidents, challenges their contention that a progressive Intelligentsia is the only force which can regenerate Russian life. "The authors of these anti-Russian articles", he writes, "are apparently preaching only to the Intelligentsia, and simply do not address the church-going 'people' or call to their simple brothers who have gone astray." A spiritual renaissance is taking place amongst the Russian "people" he claims: "Can people behave like this if they are devoid of mystical freedom? . . . Orthodox Russia lives!"¹⁰

Slavophiles believe that "rootlessness" is the cause of moral decay in the Soviet Union. An anonymous priest writes to *Veche* :

It dismays me to see all the people who cannot stop drinking, to watch us sinking under waves of depravity, family ties being destroyed, and more and more people losing direction in their lives, wasting their existence without faith in anything, turning into hooligans and criminals.¹¹

Fr. Dmitri Dudko comments: "we see around us drunkenness, immorality, the decay of the family . . ."¹² P. Derzhavin claims that moral decay is rife because the traditional Russian way of life has been violently disrupted: "Unsuccessful economic reconstruction and unlimited State intervention have undermined the healthy national foundations of the life of our people . . ."¹³

Nationalism

Adulation of the "people" is closely linked with the theme of Russian nationalism. Even moderate slavophiles find the theme attractive. In a letter to *Vestnik RSKhD*, Osipov, by no means an extremist, writes :

Christ and His teachings are in the final analysis more important for me than nationalism. But I know the soul of the contemporary Russian: the national principle is at the moment more clear and alive for him than the religious principle. Hence patriotism, national self-consciousness and self-respect provide at the moment the only reliable bridge to moral, cultural and biological salvation.¹⁴

Osipov is perhaps proposing a dangerous policy. Subordination of the religious principle to the national principle has produced such documents

as *Slovo Natsii*, a nationalist tract in which racialist and totalitarian themes predominate.¹⁵

Antisemitism often accompanies Russian chauvinism and antisemitic themes are to be found in slavophil writings. Liberal slavophiles are worried by this, for to them Christian love and tolerance are an integral part of their philosophy of life. M. S. Agursky, himself a Jew but not unsympathetic to the liberal slavophil cause, criticizes the (often unintentional) antisemitic element within Orthodox Russian nationalism. He writes:

The Russian nationalist movement patently exaggerates the part which the Jews have played in provoking distrust of this movement when it ascribes almost exclusively to them any attacks on the Russian State or the Russian nation. Sadly, we gain the impression that the Jews are a kind of lightning conductor for the Russian nationalist movement. They receive the anger destined for other targets.¹⁶

Distrust of Western Democracy

Slavophiles frequently blame the Jews for importing Western ideologies (such as Marxism) which in their view have perverted the true course of Russian social and political development. Jews they call "rootless cosmopolitans" and also apply this term to anyone who admires the West and seeks to emulate its achievements. So far there has been little dialogue between slavophiles and westernizers, who believe that Russia should adopt Western democracy. Academician Sakharov, generally taken by slavophiles to be the leader of the westernizers, is usually vilified as one who "does not love Russia". In an interview with Western reporters in 1972, Osipov expressed his cordial sympathy with the aims of Sakharov's Democratic Movement. However, only formal acknowledgement is usually paid by most slavophiles to the ideals of democracy and human rights. Osipov himself wrote a few months after the above-mentioned interview: "I believe that the question of human rights in the USSR is *less* important at this present historical moment than the problem of the perishing of the Russian nation."¹⁷

Slavophiles are deeply suspicious of appeals to "rights", whether these be the rights of a class or of individuals in society. They prefer to stress the importance of "duty". They condemn the assertion of the "individual" against "society", because their ideal is *sobornost*, or "diversity in unity" within society.¹⁸ They attack the Western concept of freedom, which has led to crime, immorality and self-seeking. In a letter to the editors, a reader of *Veche* writes:

The essence of the Russian world-view . . . is contained in the principle of freedom – not in the sense of anarchic self-will but in the sense of one's harmonious reconciliation with the interests of the community, of the whole people. . . . It was in its search for such harmony, in

its passionate desire to attain it that the Russian people plunged back and forth between revolts and despotism, with the result that outsiders, and people who did not understand the Russians, invariably described them, and occasionally still continue to describe them, either as a nation of robbers or as a nation of slaves.¹⁹

The neo-slavophiles are therefore united in their opposition to any form of Western democracy for Russia, which, to them, is based on a divisive individualism and not on *sobornost*. Most slavophiles advocate a form of monarchy.²⁰ Political power in the slavophil view is not a right, to be fought for and seized by force; it is a heavy duty which involves sacrifice. It has to be shouldered by one man — the tsar — who will take upon himself the sins of the Russian people and be answerable for their destiny.

The Soviet State and Neo-Slavophiles

Neo-slavophiles present a spectrum of ideas about the political nature of the ideal State. The spectrum falls broadly into three sections: a "democratic" liberal group, a centrist group, and a rightist group.²¹ Solzhenitsyn belongs to the first group; Osipov and Shimanov are centrists; the authors of *Slovo Natsii* typify the rightists. The rightists call for autocracy and nationalism borders at times on neo-nazism. The centrists and liberals, on the other hand, want a type of autocracy or monarchy which is limited. But they do not make clear what form such limitation should take. This is not surprising perhaps, since all slavophiles are wary of placing reliance on political structures and on constitutions. They prefer social and political relationships to be guided by the commandment of Christian love.²² Solzhenitsyn, for example, is equivocal: he wants a system of laws as a check on autocratic arbitrariness, but firmly denies that a Western-style democratic system is practicable for Russia at the present time.²³

So neo-slavophiles are frequently tolerant of the Soviet political structure. A traditional Russian Orthodox belief is that all power stems from God; if it is unjust, then it must be suffered with Christian humility. Neo-slavophiles generally endorse this view.²⁴ Osipov, a centrist, emphasizes the non-political nature of *Veche* and its loyalty to the Soviet regime. "We believe," he once said, "that problems of national identity must and can be solved within any state structure. The Soviet social and political structure, based on national principles and on a real observance of the Soviet Constitution, suits us completely."²⁵ Another centrist, Shimanov, sees potential for the future in a political structure of the type which the communists have established, but reformed, of course, in a Christian direction. In his view, the Soviet regime does not need to alter its structure, but must adopt the Christian ideology of love: "If we encourage the imminent transfor-

...matation of the Communist Party into the 'Orthodox Party of the Soviet Union' we shall really achieve the 'Ideal State'.²⁶

Neo-slavophiles find themselves in a dilemma over the question of practical political change. *Veche* claims to follow the teachings of the classical slavophiles, who wrote at a time when it seemed at least possible that the Russian autocracy could be modified in a Christian direction. The relative optimism of the early 19th century had faded by the late 19th century and early 20th century, and slavophiles found themselves either pushed into overt reformist political action or else implicitly supporting the autocracy in its unreformed state. Neither position satisfied the true slavophile's conviction that the ideal political system is an autocracy guided by a sense of Christian love and duty.²⁷ The same dilemma confronts slavophiles today: while rejecting "westernizing" political reformism, they either passively accept the outward forms of the Soviet political structure, or else explicitly approve of it as potentially the ideal system. Meanwhile, they believe in a spiritually quite different autocracy: a Russian autocracy will only be truly Russian if it is Christian. This means that true slavophilism and the Soviet regime are ultimately incompatible. In the words of one slavophile: "The highest criterion is spiritual reality. Outside the context of this reality, the people, the nation and the homeland turn into fetishes and idols."²⁸

Russia Called to Repent

The Bolshevik Revolution, for slavophiles, stemmed from Russia's sin: it was a fall from grace. Russians had misunderstood their spiritual calling, and whereas they were potentially a nation of saints, they had become possessed by devils.²⁹ The neo-slavophiles therefore call Russia to repentance. Bolshevism is a spiritual sickness which must be fought with spiritual weapons. Mikhail Agursky criticizes Sakharov for assuming "that a simple pronouncement of democracy will usher in an era of prosperity and freedom for Russia".³⁰ No, a programme of moral reform and spiritual rebirth is first necessary if political change is to be lasting. Such a programme must of course proceed gradually. It may pose a less obvious threat to the Soviet regime than do overtly political programmes. Nevertheless it involves a repudiation of the Soviet system at the most fundamental level.

The main slavophiles were: I. V. Kireevsky (1806-56); A. S. Khomyakov (1804-60), Yu. F. Samarin (1819-76) and the brothers K. S. Aksakov (1817-60) and I. S. Aksakov (1823-86). The ideas of these men were developed in various ways by F. M. Dostoevsky (1821-81), N. Ya Danilevsky (1822-85), K. N. Leontev (1831-81) and V. S. Solov'ev (1853-1900). In the early 20th century slavophile themes appeared in the writings of many thinkers including S. N. Bulgakov (1871-1944) and N. A. Berdyaev (1874-1948), who were both involved in a religious renaissance which derived much of its inspiration from Solov'ev. This religious renaissance is now inspiring contemporary slavophiles in the Soviet Union.

² See John Dunlop: "The Eleventh Hour", *Frontier* Vol. 18, No. 2, Summer 1975, pp. 71-82.

³ The head of the movement, I. V. Ogurtsov, received a 15-year sentence. For more information about the movement see the book *VSKhSON*, YMCA Press, Paris 1975 (in Russian), compiled by John Dunlop.

⁴ Osipov was arrested on 28 November 1974 and subsequently given an eight-year sentence.

⁵ P. Derzhavin: "Zametki o natsionalnom vozrozhdenii", hereafter cited as "Zametki" (AS 1357) *Vestnik RSKhD* No. 106, pp. 261, 270. (AS= Arkhiv Samizdata.)

⁶ K. Radugin: "Budi sie, budi!" (1970-2) *Vestnik RSKhD* No. 106, p. 319.

⁷ Fr. D. Dudko: *O nashem upovanii*, YMCA Press, Paris 1975, p. 123.

⁸ "Zametki russkogo khristianina", *Veche* No. 1 (January 1971), pp. 48-51.

⁹ G. M. Shimanov: *Letter* (May 1975), pp. 5-6.

¹⁰ L. Ibragimov: "Po povodu sbornika statei, posvyashchennykh sudbam Rossii", *Vestnik RSKhD* No. 106, pp. 312, 314.

¹¹ "Zayavlenie syvashchennika", *Veche* No. 2 (19 May 1971).

¹² Fr. D. Dudko: *O nashem upovanii*, p. 49.

¹³ P. Derzhavin. "Zametki", p. 265.

¹⁴ V. Osipov: "Pismo v redaktsiyn zhurnala *Vestnik RSKhD*", hereafter cited as "Pismo v redaktsiyu", (26 November 1972) *Vestnik RSKhD* No. 106 p. 295.

¹⁵ See D. Pospelovskiy: "The Resurgence of Russian Nationalism in *Samizdat*", *Survey* No. 86, Winter 1973, pp. 51-74. Pospelovskiy reviews *Slovo Natsii* at some length and also criticizes *Veche* for including ultra-nationalist articles. But Osipov was surely sincere in wanting to prevent *Veche* becoming an organ of the extreme right alone. The article by "O.M.", "Survey o russkom natsionalisme", *Veche* No. 9 (19 December 1973) is a reply to Pospelovskiy's criticisms.

¹⁶ M. S. Agurskiy: "Otvety zhurnalu *Veche*" (14 February 1974) from the book *Iz zhurnala "Veche"* (a collection of articles from *Veche* Nos. 7-10), *Possev* (series "Volnoe Slovo") 1975, p. 152.

¹⁷ V. Osipov: "Pismo v redaktsiyu", p. 295.

¹⁸ The VSKhSON in its programme speaks of the Christian ideal, which is "Individual diversity in free unity. Christianity opposes both egoistic individualism and faceless collectivism." *VSKhSON*, YMCA Press, Paris 1975, p. 62.

¹⁹ A. S.: "Pismo v redaktsiyu - o russkom natsionalnom mirovozzrenii", *Veche* No. 5 (25 May 1972) p. 150.

²⁰ The VSKhSON advocated the restoration of a monarchy. See *VSKhSON*, p. 19.

²¹ See Dunlop: "The Eleventh Hour", *Frontier* Vol. 18, No. 2, Summer 1975, p. 75. After the closure of *Veche*, the new journal *Zemlya* ("The Land") came to represent the "democratic" group within slavophilism and the journal *Moskovsky Sbornik* ("Moscow Miscellany") the centrist group.

²² *Ibid.* p. 80.

²³ *Ibid.* pp. 78, 80.

²⁴ See V. Osipov: "K voprosu o sfinske", *Veche* No. 1 (January 1971); Fr. D. Dudko, *O nashem upovanii*, p. 220.

²⁵ V. Osipov: "Interview" with Western journalists (AS 1468), (25 April 1972) *Vestnik RSKhD* No. 106, p. 303.

²⁶ G. M. Shimanov: "Idealnoe gosudarstvo" (29 May 1975) p. 8.

²⁷ See Pospelovskiy: "The Resurgence of Russian Nationalism in *Samizdat*".

²⁸ P. Derzhavin: "Zametki", p. 8.

²⁹ Dostoevsky in his novel *The Devils* depicts this religious aspect of revolutionaries and in the "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor" (*The Brothers Karamazov*) he predicts the consequences for a society ruled by these antichrists. Solovev's last work, *Three Conversations*, culminates in a section on the same theme. Solovev's disciple, S. Bulgakov, demonstrates the religious nature of revolutionary activity in his article "Heroism and Religious Zeal" in *Vekhi* (1909).

³⁰ M. Agurskiy: "Mezhdunarodnoe znachenie Pisma k vozhdym", *Vestnik RSKhD* No. 112-13, p. 224.