

# TONY CHADWICK PRIZE 1994 WINNING ESSAY

## PIONEER RUSSIAN PHILOSOPHERS

by Pamela Barlow

It seems appropriate this year that an historical subject should be considered: what better, therefore, than one which appears to have been almost totally neglected - that of pre-19th century Russian philosophers? How many Russian philosophers could the average home-grown philosopher-in-the-street name earlier than Alexander Herzen, or even V.I.Lenin? Or the other mid-18th century Russians? It is high time the balance should be redressed. It is even doubtful if many could honestly say they have read all of Herzen and Lenin's philosophical works in English, much less in the original languages. Even an eminent Professor of Philosophy in New York, formerly from St.Petersburg, on the first page of his History of Russian Philosophy<sup>[1]</sup> confidently asserts: "Russian philosophy began to develop only in the 19th century" and goes on to dismiss those earlier than 1800 in a mere two pages. And yet this is to completely overlook the History of Russian thought, knowledge of which might have proved invaluable to Western politicians and leaders of today.

This study must confine itself to those of the 18th century, amongst whom three are outstanding, although one only just qualifies as pre-19th century. They are Gregory (Grigory) Saviich Skovoroda (1722-1794), A.N. Radischev (1749-1802) and Pyotr Chadaev (1794-1856). The authoritative Professor Copleston, in the ultimate book of his mammoth "History of Philosophy" (for which, shamefully, in the political climate of the time he had to search for a publisher) dismisses the first in a couple of paragraphs, as he also does Radishchev, according more detailed treatment only to Chadaev.

To be fair, the entire entry on Philosophy in the Bolshaya Sovetskaya Encyclopedia consists of a scant eight pages, the three above-mentioned philosophers totalling only six columns. Even such a prolific essayist as N. A. Dobrolyoulov in his Collected Essays <sup>[2]</sup> gives these early philosophers not a single mention. Yet they were the first philosophers to write in Russian (Ukrainian, in the case of Skovoroda); three individuals who were so determined to pursue their ideals that one was exiled and condemned to death and one committed suicide.

Gregory Skovoroda was born in the Ukraine, Poltava Region, a year before Peter the Great died. He studied at the Kiev-Mogilyevski clerical Academy. On the instance of the Empress Elisabeth I, who admired his singing, he was summoned to join the Empress' choir in St.Petersburg. He returned to complete his studies but, aged 28, he refused Ordination and accepted a position as a church singer, travelling for three years in Western Europe - to Budapest, Bratislava and, probably, Austria and Italy, during which time he learnt German and possibly a little French. It is unlikely, however, he was much attracted to Western philosophical thinking or embraced much of it.

Back home, most of his relatives having died, he taught poetry at a seminary. Soon dismissed for his poetical theories, he then tutored for a Ukrainian nobleman. Thence he went to the prestigious Troitsa (Trinity) Monastery of St. Sergius near Moscow but once more refused a teaching position and again returned to his homeland. He subsequently underwent some sort of religious turning point and wrote mystical poems, with bouts of severe depression and constant searching for his path through life, vacillating between a fixed position, or the life of that Russian

phenomenon, the Strannik. A deep attachment to a young “disciple” apparently restored his mental equilibrium. Ultimately he opted for the way of the wanderer, living in extreme poverty, carrying his few possessions on his back. He has been compared to St. Francis of Assisi.

During the next twenty-eight years he wrote his Dialogues. He aspired to be Russia’s Socrates, and set the Dialogues using the Socratic method, and to whose subjects his were akin, though they at the same time embraced contemporary Russian religious thought. He also wrote a number of Fables and passionate letters (in Latin) to his “Disciple”, who subsequently wrote Skovoroda’s biography. A few brief paragraphs from his “Socrates in Russia” give a flavour of the bizarre conjunction of Greek philosophy and Russian theology. “Our Father who art in Heaven, wilt thou send down a Socrates to us.....so we may develop.....a philosopher native and natural to our land? Hallowed be Thy name. But the Russian land is far broader (larger) than the Greek, and it will not be easy....” and so on.<sup>[3]</sup>

His most important dialogue is cast in the form of a “Conversation among Five Travellers”, and it explores the perennial questions of ultimate goodness, of wisdom, the naming of the “Supreme Being” (he opts for “Nature”,) happiness, success, riches, peace, death and resurrection. Skovoroda’s contribution to the development of Russian philosophy was significant. So too was that of his contemporary, Alexander Nikolaevich Radishchev (1749-1802), although he was chiefly known for one work only, not strictly speaking a philosophical one, his Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow, of which more below. In the West it is doubtful he is even known for the Journey, although this work was of considerable significance in Tsarist Russia. As a philosopher it would appear he has been virtually totally neglected among philosophers here. Only Copleston mentions his one major philosophical work, “Man, his Mortality and Immortality” (“*cheloveke, ego smertnostii i bessmertii*”)

To place Radishchev in context it is necessary to sketch in his background and the historical context in which he lived, which was during the reign of Catherine II (“The Great”) <sup>[4]</sup> Born in Moscow, Radishchev came from landed gentry in the Saratov (now Penza) district. He was selected as one of the elite to serve in the Empress’ Corps of Pages, living in St. Petersburg alongside the newly-built Hermitage (Winter) Palace. Thence, at the age of seventeen, he was chosen with eleven others to study jurisprudence and other subjects in Leipzig. He learnt German, and cannot have failed to be aware of the Enlightenment and the galaxy of philosophers of the time - Diderot, Rousseau, Mably, Helvétius, Raynal, Montesquieu, Liebnitz and Herder. His education completed, he entered the Civil Service as Chief of the St. Petersburg Customs Office. He had time to allow his thoughts on the social evils then prevailing to crystallize, and to write the work for which he is best known, the Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow, a semi-fictionalized account, printed on his private press, from his own journey and encounters therein which revealed the hardships and poverty endured by the Russian people under serfdom. Whatever its literary merits, which have been disputed, we cannot know whether he realised what a bombshell he had written. The Empress read and annotated it and he followed the well-trodden path of dangerous thinkers in Russia, and was sentenced to death commuted to ten years’ exile to Siberia. Shackled, leaving his family (he had by then married and had two sons) he made the long journey, which broke his health. At Ilmsk, through his aristocratic connections, he was granted a house and his family, which increased to seven, eventually joined him. Health partly regained, he had years in which to write his philosophical work, “On Man....”. This, as had been the Journey, was a landmark in the tardy development of Russian philosophy. In four parts, the first two parts outlined the theses of the materialists against immortality, which claimed to prove that material properties can be assimilated with mental processes; that mental life depends on the

body and the death of the body can only mean death of mental life. In the other two parts Radishchev argues against this. He attempts to prove that the soul is an independent entity, distinct from the body; that it is “simple, non-extended and indivisible”, if consciousness is to be explained. The purpose of life is to strive for perfection. Man will have another more perfect body and will grow in perfection. Radishchev opposed mysticism and so did not become a Freemason, but apparently believed immortality was necessary to attain the highest morality. On Man includes a description of the death of Socrates - perhaps relevant to his own future death - and attempts to demolish Rousseau’s ideas and those of many other Western writers, as well as the conclusions of the scientists. (By far the best detailed account of On Man... is given in Dr. David Marshall Lang’s excellent Biography, Allen & Unwin, 1959). Radishchev began this work in 1792. It is unclear when it was completed.

Poor Radishchev! One concludes he died a disappointed man, his ideals betrayed by autocracy. Although his sentence was remitted and he returned to St. Petersburg he, like Skovoroda, suffered periods of deep depression, and lived in fear of being sent back to Siberia. His end was terrible indeed. Suddenly overcome by depression, he drank a glass of acid and then attempted to cut his throat, by suicide suffering the most terrible death of all. Since then he has been dubbed Russia’s first Radical and a martyr. Although this is open-to-question, his writings having occasioned his persecution certainly encouraged self-censorship in the climate of the crude censorship laws which followed shortly after his time. His poetry was sufficiently admired by Pushkin to inspire Russia’s King of Poets to write an ode to him after Radishchev’s death.

Skovoroda and Radishchev paved the way in Russian philosophy for Peter Chaadaev, (1794-1856), their successor. But he is a true child of the West, writing in French and not in Russian, and therefore would require a separate study.

Chaadaev’s philosophical outpourings were entirely religious, and did not much contribute to history or philosophy, despite his attempts to apply his ideas to that of the significance of Russia within that of the world. By the 19th century the advent of the whole issue of Slavophiles and Westernizers added a completely new dimension to virtually every aspect of Russian intellectual life, including philosophy. But that is a different story, which belongs to the next century and the sudden burgeoning of mid- nineteenth century philosophy, the philosophy of the idealists and the Romantics, which was to inspire a great generation of Russian novelists. Therein lay once again the true seeds of the Russian “Soul” (“dusha”) - that strong skein since time immemorial, of the deeply religious mystic. It has once again returned, but as all who know their Russia, has never been absent.

#### Notes

1. N.O. Lossky, International Universities Press, Inc., New York 1951.
2. Various Soviet editions.
3. Trans. George Kline. As far as can be ascertained virtually none of his writings have been translated from Ukrainian into Russian.
4. This was the illusory world of Catherine the Great’s “Enlightened Absolutism” inspired by the Empress’s dabblings in the works of Rousseau and his contemporaries.

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