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Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal
New Myth, New World: from Nietzsche to Stalinism.
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SUMMING UP AND MOVING ON

For practically everyone who has taken a serious interest in Russian Nietzscheana, the associative series Friedrich Nietzsche – reception of his ideas – Russia... will continue with the name of Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal. The collections “Nietzsche in Russia” (Princeton, 1986) and “Nietzsche and Soviet Culture: Ally and Adversary” (Cambridge, 1994), under her editorship -- in its own way an introduction to the topic of ‘Nietzsche and intellectual life in Russia’ – have become cult books for the first generation of post-Soviet humanities students. A forbidden cultural stratum was opened up during the liberalisation of the Gorbachev era (1985-1991): Russian readers gained access for the first time to the works of early twentieth-century religious thinkers. A ‘by-product’ of this interest in idealism was the sudden rise in the popularity of Nietzsche’s work. It really became possible to find out about the intellectual context in which the various different interpretations of his philosophical works arose. Bernice Rosenthal’s works about the fate of Nietzsche’s ideas in Russia had a defining influence on the direction of Nietzsche studies in post-Soviet Russia during the last two decades.

Her new monograph *New Myth, New World*, the fruit of ten years’ work, has become, in my opinion, a turning point in the chronicle of Nietzsche studies in Russia – its distinctive ‘a summary and promise’. Rosenthal’s book draws a line under a whole literary-historical tendency in the study of Nietzsche’s legacy and its influence on Russian culture, a tendency formed and framed within the paradigm of the Russian religious renaissance at the start of the twentieth century. Rosenthal’s book presents a microcosm of Russian and Soviet Nietzscheana, which contains a collection of much material relating to Nietzsche reception in Russia, brought together and sorted chronologically.

Nietzsche’s ideas, seen by his Russian readers through the prism of their own mythologemes, which originate in folklore, Orthodoxy, and the cults of saints, tsars and writers, defined the principles by which our country’s twentieth-century intellectuals lived and tried to change the world. Whether they accepted his philosophy or rejected it, not a single generation of Russian philosophers during the last century avoided a dialogue with Nietzsche. The myth of ‘twentieth-century Russia’ was formed by its thinkers’ quest for an answer to the eternal questions of the essence of the human personality and a new ideal of man, and also, therefore, of new forms of art, morality, politics and science: questions which might revitalise culture, reintegrate society and change the world.

In Rosenthal’s book the intellectual history of Russia in the last century is presented in terms of three basic stages in the influence of Nietzsche on Russian thought: The Seed-Time: Silver Age of Russian Culture (1890-1917); Period from Bolshevik Revolution to Stalin’s Time (1917-1953); and De-Stalinization, the second half of the twentieth century, right up to, schematically indicated, the present era of the rule of President Putin. The principal difference between Rosenthal’s work and the majority of investigations with a similar approach is the accent on the less obvious, hidden influence of Nietzsche’s ideas on Russian reality, in particular his mediating role in the unique experiment of constructing a socialist society. Focusing on culture as well as on political events and social structure, the author highlights a set of issues that she calls ‘the Nietzschean agenda’. This agenda was established

by Russian poets, philosophers, and political activists some two decades before the Bolshevik Revolution, when his thought was russified and absorbed into the culture. Responding to the changes transforming Russia, Nietzsche enthusiasts espoused new values and sought a new ideal (in Nietzschean terms, a new myth) by which to live and on which to base their work and transform their world.

Nietzsche's ideas became firmly rooted in Russian culture. It is unsurprising that Silver Age figures enthusiastically sought 'a Russian Nietzsche' in the previous epoch, and found him not only in Dostoevskii (Shestov), but also in Leont'ev (Rozanov), in Rozanov (Merezhkovskii) and even in Lermontov (Solov'ev). His ideas had a fundamental, if mediated, role in defining the sources, characteristics and evolution of socialist culture in Russia. It is true that practically the only aspect of Nietzsche's output discussed directly in the 1920s was his philosophy of culture, and especially his interpretation of antiquity (Vyacheslav Ivanov, Zelinskii, Veresaev, Losev). Nevertheless the common motifs of post-revolutionary art – antireligious feeling, glorification of the post-revolutionary superman, aspiration towards and faith in the future – bore clear evidence of a Nietzschean orientation. Nietzsche's hidden influence manifested itself in the impact of his ideas, slogans and images, frequently in a transformed guise, on theatre, architecture and mass festival processions in Communist Russia. Despite the apparent incompatibility, at first glance, of Nietzscheanism (with its cult of the individual) and Communist ideology (with its total subordination of the individual to the collective), the presence of Nietzsche's ideas in the intellectual life of Soviet Russia is an indubitable fact.

In the early stages of Soviet power, with the zeal, characteristic of that time, for the creation of a new culture, Nietzsche exerted a big influence both on art and on ideology. It is easy to find Nietzschean motifs in the works of the Acmeists, who came to take the place of the Symbolists (Gumilev, Mandel'shtam), and of Futurist writers (Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov). There are echoes of the Nietzschean revolt against tradition, of faith in man's capacity to create different spiritual values, and of the conception of the 'will to power'. All of these received specific treatment in post-revolutionary Russia. They influenced not only the various experiments at that time in literature, theatre and the cinema (Eisenstein, Lunacharsky), but also the work of ideologists and practitioners of Bolshevism (Bukharin, Trotsky, Bogdanov, even Lenin), who were developing plans for real changes in society, influenced by the enthusiasm for Nietzsche's ideas which they had experienced in their younger years. Nietzsche's influence on the work of Zamyatin, Pasternak, Tynyanov, Kaverin, and on Gorky, the founding father of Socialist Realism, is carefully examined in Rosenthal's book.

To a certain degree one might call the book an encyclopedia of Russian Nietzscheana, as it lists practically all the basic themes, works and names of Russian figures connected with Nietzsche. Its focus, though, is on the period of Russian culture which is least researched as far as Nietzsche studies are concerned: the Soviet period. The author resurrects texts and works of Socialist art which today are forgotten, reviving them with a 'Nietzschean interpretation'.

Rosenthal's work is also valuable, though, in my opinion, because it reflects a new paradigm in the response to the 'Russian Nietzsche': Nietzsche as a political thinker. The author's scholarly intuition, which sometimes cuts across the work's declared aims, notes and delineates a tendency, a set of problems which are obviously going to dictate the pattern of Nietzsche reception in Russia during the next few years. The basic tendency might be designated as work in keeping with the common European discourse on Nietzsche, and a move away from the restoration of the national tradition of Nietzsche studies established during the Russian Silver Age.

The fall of the USSR did not automatically bring Russian discussions on Nietzsche to pre-revolutionary level of sophistication and finesse. The veritable avalanche of publications of Nietzsche writings after 1990 has been accompanied by a lot of publications on him that have either repeated interpretations already formulated in 1900-1920, or have tried to use Nietzsche for immediate political concerns. Nietzsche is either archaicized (an inspiration for the Russian Silver Age) or is appropriated by ideologists of the far right and radical nationalist thought. Today, though, Russian philosophers, political theorists and social scientists are trying to do something different with Nietzsche and with the help of Nietzsche. Current Russian works are oriented towards post-World War Two European debates.

The fate of Nietzsche in Russia today largely repeats his fate in Europe, but with a delay of thirty or forty years. A thinker who was largely ignored in Germany after World War Two as a result of a vitriolic critique by the theoreticians of the Frankfurt School for his links with fascism, Nietzsche was reborn in a different, radical

democratic and iconoclastic guise in France in the works of Deleuze, Foucault, Blanchot, Derrida, etc. In Russia today one of the principal tasks is the de-Nazification of Nietzsche, a significant element of which involves the translation of well-known post-war works by Western Nietzsche scholars. In Italy, students and colleagues of Colli and Montinari worked on the publication of his complete collection of works at the same time as a common European agenda was being created for Nietzsche studies. In 2005, under the aegis of the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences, we see the start of the publication of a Critical Edition of Nietzsche's Complete Works (Friedrich Nietzsche, Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, hrsg. Von Giorgio Colli und Mazzino Montinari; Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter). At the same time a Russian Nietzsche Society has been established, with a mission to act as the connecting link between Russian and foreign Nietzsche scholars, and to inform Russian researchers about new developments in Nietzsche studies worldwide and the work of Western Nietzsche societies.

In the English-speaking world, controversies between those whom Alasdair MacIntyre called 'left Nietzscheans' (Tracy Strong, Alexander Nehamas, and Leslie Thiele, for instance) and their critics from the right (Werner Dannhauser, Peter Berkowitz, and so on) shaped the agenda for decades to come. This intellectual impulse contributed to a final rebirth of interest in the German-speaking world as well (Henning Ottman, Urs Marti, others). Today Nietzsche's name is one of those most frequently cited across the whole political spectrum of the Russian political elite, from extreme left to extreme right. Every epoch exists in a context of specific, objective, historically-determined oppositions, particular to that period. Russian political thinkers today are turning to Nietzsche in their attempt to resolve the conflict between, on the one hand, the desire to modernise Russia, to sign up for global structures, with their apparent tendency towards the weakening of the national state as a player on the world stage; and on the other hand, the active striving for a new national identity after the end of the 'age of ideology'.

The paradigm of Nietzsche reception is changing in Russia today. The very genre of Rosenthal's book – her move into the history of political ideas – is a symptom of an altered reality. Rosenthal's research is evidence that the 'Russian Nietzsche' is of interest today primarily for the attempt to read him as a political thinker. In the West Nietzsche's political ideas were first widely discussed in the prewar and wartime years. In Russia, though, the view of his works as texts on political philosophy has its origins half a century earlier. As a result of a specific socio-cultural context long before the socialist revolution, Nietzsche was perceived as a supporter of left-wing ideas – an ally of the Russian revolutionary movement, a proponent of revolutionary nihilism, of 'mystical anarchism', of ecstatic sectarianism and spiritual universalism. Nietzsche's ideas were given favourable recognition in articles by the leading Populist theoretician Nikolai Mikhailovskii, and by Nietzschean Marxists such as Gorky, Lunacharsky, Bogdanov, and the ideologist of world revolution Lev Trotsky. It goes without saying that, as 'radical democrats', the Russian Nietzscheans could not be close to the ideas of Nietzsche himself.

So what will be the Russian myth of Nietzsche in the twenty-first century? At the forefront of Russian Nietzscheana will be problems which the philosopher himself formulated at the end of the nineteenth century: national and cultural identity; the transition from a national to a global political order; the democratisation of Europe as a stimulus to the appearance of tyrants; the idea of a united Europe.