

Introduction

Andrea Zink · Rosalinde Sartorti · Annett Jubara

Published online: 27 October 2010
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2010

In recent years, the field of East European Studies has seen quite a large number of new publications on Russian culture. They range from so called textbooks or readers (Kelly and Shepherd 1998; Rzhevsky 1999; von Geldern/Stites 1995), to numerous studies on special aspects of Russian culture as, for instance, gender questions (Edmondson 2001) or the role of women (Marsh 1998; Rosslyn and Tosi 2007), mass media (Murašov and Witte 2003), esoteric tendencies (Vinitsky 2009), or religious Christian motives (Uffelmann 2010), to name only a few. Other monographs present Russian literature within the context of general cultural history (Wachtel and Vinitsky 2009), compose Russian cultural history on the basis of an autobiography (Nivat 2007) or focus on the problems of analyzing Russian Culture in general (Gurevič 2001). In addition, there is the meanwhile classic analysis by Larry Wolff of the ‘invention’ of Eastern Europe (Wolff 1994) and Boris Groys’ critical reflection on the alleged ‘otherness’ of Russia (Groys 1995). Most interesting in this context is the re-edition of Pavel Miljukov’s, the famous Russian liberal thinker, *Outlines of Russian culture*, first published in 1898 (Miliukov 2006).

The renewed interest of a broader public in Russia and its culture triggered first by Perestroika and then by post Soviet changes opened the market for literary-style treatments of Russian cultural history (Figs 2002; Volkov 2008) that picture Russia

A. Zink (✉)

Universität Basel, Slavisches Seminar, Nadelberg 4, Basel 4051, Switzerland
e-mail: andrea.zink@unibas.ch

R. Sartorti

Osteuropa-Institut, Freie Universität Berlin, AB Geschichte und Kultur,
Garystr. 55, 14195 Berlin, Germany
e-mail: sartor@zedat.fu-berlin.de

A. Jubara

Johannes Gutenberg Uni Mainz, FB Angewandte Sprach- u. Kulturwissenschaft,
An der Hochschule 2, 76726 Gernersheim, Germany
e-mail: jubara@uni-mainz.de

in the usual and widely accepted way of the mysterious and exotic other. While the proximity of Russia and Western Europe during the avant-garde period is undisputed, there is a trend in recent scholarly research towards a revival of traditional perceptions of Russia (Ingold 2007) where the Russian soul and the Russian mentality as elements of a culture are conceived ontologically, that is, essentialistically. This trend is not shared by the authors of this volume, instead they understand culture as transient in time and as regulated by people.

What else then makes this collection differ from the majority of studies on Russian culture?

Diversity of perspectives

The representatives of different disciplines and countries agreed on conceiving culture as a social construct and combining their subject-specific approaches with the analysis of cultural models. The attempt was made, on the basis of individual examples of Russian cultural discourses from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to promote a greater transparency in the various, often politically motivated uses of the term ‘culture’ and to ultimately refine our views about the potential power of cultural discourses.

The essays collected here investigate some previously unexplored realms, focus on parallel movements or brush against the grain of familiar material in order to introduce new perspectives into established views. The greatest benefit of this approach is the diversity of perspectives it enables. The scholars gathered here represent different disciplines (history, philosophy, literature, semiotics and communication) and are affiliated with universities in Western and Eastern Europe. This multidisciplinary approach, however, gains its special qualities only by having a common focus:

Focus on cultural models

The level of analysis of all the articles in this volume is not the level of cultural studies (whether this is understood traditionally as cultural history or contemporary cultural studies), but the level of cultural *theory*: all the contributions consider different *concepts* of Russian culture and how they are used in various stages of Russian history. In this way, not individual cultural products or events are of interest, but rather *discourses* about culture and their characteristics.

Russian culture as European culture

In addition to their theoretical status, the discourses on culture analyzed here also share common content. They assume the European character of Russian culture, either implicitly or explicitly. This is especially true for discourses in which such a condition is not initially suspected, such as the discourse of ‘Russian

exceptionalism', of 'Soviet patriotism' or the work of Dostoevsky. Regardless whether this relationship is viewed as problematic or used constructively, Russian culture is measured in all negotiated discourses against Europe and based on a European foundation.

Cultural discourses: concealed, dissident, hegemonic

Finally, this volume distinguishes itself by analyzing a wide range of subjects: for instance cultural discourses that have been marginalized in academia (M. Lifšic' Vico-interpretation) are discussed alongside the self-understanding of cultural elites (such as the Russian liberals) or uncomfortable modern thinkers (A. Akhiezer). Conceptions of civilization and culture will be traced into the unfamiliar territory of the more or less veiled argumentation strategies of text and images (constitutions, encyclopedias, the classics of art and literature) and political programs.

The first article, however, is somewhat different. Evert van der Zweerde ("Where is the Common Ground?") does not speak, or speaks only marginally, about philosophical conceptions of culture. Instead, he develops a concept of philosophical culture himself. The impetus for this development can be found in three concrete examples: the correspondence between Mamardašvili and Althusser, Derrida's visit to Moscow and Haardt and Plotnikov's German-Russian cooperation in the development of a philosophical conceptual history.

The idea of the horizon is central to van der Zweerde's considerations. Borders, as they exist, for example, in the 'untranslatability' of philosophical concepts and in specific, especially unreflected presuppositions, cannot and should not be explained away, but should rather be made visible as such. At the same time, the possibility of a rapprochement and (future) fusion of the horizons of understanding is demonstrated. Van der Zweerde avoids an appeal to a hegemonic culture (e.g.: the Western, global Anglophone culture), and even makes due without withdrawing to an autochthonous, essentialist culture. According to van der Zweerde, there is in any (philosophical) culture a field in which this culture compares itself to other cultures, that is, a field of reflection on the relation of the self to the other. These 'fields' are the real common ground of different cultures.

The following contributions can be seen as nascent, partial realizations of this vision: they highlight the hidden and potential dialogues between Russian and Western European manners of thinking and represent building blocks of a broadening and an entanglement of horizons, without denying the difficulties standing in the way of this endeavor. As the history of this volume shows, the authors share van der Zweerde's legitimate claim that any reflection on culture or cultural models could only make sense under the premise that a real exchange of cultures has been achieved.

The division of the anthology into three parts is based on the categorization of traditional academic disciplines (philosophy, history and literary and cultural studies), which are also the authors' individual focuses of research. Nevertheless, various points of contact and sometimes surprising connections, transcending disciplinary boundaries, become visible between the individual contributions. They

will be presented in short in the following paragraphs. The similarities extend beyond the localization of Russia in Europe (and respectively, the rivalry between Russia and Europe), which is found in all of the discourses studied. A spatial comparison seems to lead to a temporal one, not unlike a Bakhtinian chronotope. The (hidden, open, critical or nostalgic) look toward the West brings not only foreign and native, that is national, cultures to light, but the comparison also allows the idea of ‘progress’ and, correspondingly, ‘backwardness’ (the shortcomings) of Russian culture to arise. However, it is worth examining the addressee at this point: backwardness and progress can serve the ‘invention’ of reality and, accordingly, lead to social differentiation, but they can also undermine a supposedly progressive reality. The neuralgic moments and epochs of Russian history play a crucial role in the interpretation of patterns of deficit and progress: the great reforms of the second half of the nineteenth century, the Revolution, the Stalin era and the post-communist phase.

In most cultural discourses, the contact itself, the communication between Russia and the rest of Europe becomes an object of reflection. As van der Zweerde’s essay notes, cultural discourses address or imply possible and impossible translations, past and future dialogues, apparent and real ‘special paths’ (*Sonderwege*). This serves to attract a particularly wide audience. Location and national speculation are reflected in texts with large print runs and long-lasting images.

Cultural theorist and philosopher Mikhail Lifšic, with whose work Annett Jubara deals in her contribution, offers a critical examination of post-revolutionary progress. Rooted in the tradition of the ‘Westernizers’ and working from a Hegelian-Marxist perspective, Lifšic attempts to break the spell of the discourse of Russian backwardness that was so typical for the Westernizers. This attempt and the related concept of ‘regression in progress’ (which recurs later in Lukács) must be seen in the context of a historical-philosophical approach seeking to understand the tragedy of the Russian Revolution.

Regarding the addressee, the Hegelian-Marxist discourse of Mikhail Lifšic demonstrates agreement with the discourses of Russian liberals that is probably only surprising at first glance (see the article by Igor’ Narskij): The intended recipient of the liberal discourse is an imagined community whose isolation is reinforced by the Intelligentsia authors by appeals to themselves. The unique nature of the text “Giambattista Vico”, examined closely by Annett Jubara, lies in Lifšic’s appeals to the revolutionary Intelligentsia at the moment of its disappearance, at the moment of its destruction by the Stalinist terror in 1937.

Igor’ Narskij’s contribution relates to the self-understanding of Russian liberal intellectuals in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The community of intellectuals was created by maintaining a two sided, carefully calculated distance: The group distinguished itself both from the political elite and from the people. In doing so, the Russian intellectuals made use of the concepts of ‘backwardness’ and ‘benightedness’ (*temnota*) to define their own identity. Originally used in the discussions between the Westernizers and Slavophiles to distinguish Russia from Europe, backwardness and progress were reinterpreted as an internal, social border. The peasants were seen as backward, the intellectuals themselves were progressive, European and ‘civilized’ (*kul’turnyj*). Narskij underlines the fact that Russian reality

was created as a backward reality. The cliché of a ‘dark’ people and a ‘dark’ land is the starting point for the concept of ‘*kul’turnost*’ (‘sophistication’), which, in turn, was linked by liberal historians to the search for an ‘independent personality’. The particular tragedy of the Russian liberal intellectuals is that their conception of backwardness produced a fatal discursive effect: the inclusion of the population in the sphere of political activity is stymied at precisely the moment when the masses of the Russian empire come into (political) movement. The attitude of the lonely and misunderstood liberal intellectual, an attitude that can be found among liberals all across Europe, leads, especially in Russia, to a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’.

Edward Swiderski examines the cultural theory of Aleksandr Akhiezer, who—in contrast to the pseudo-universalist trend of *kul’urologija* in post-soviet times—tries to take a closer look at Russia itself. He focuses on Russian society’s production of meaning, on its self-representation and its world-vision that becomes manifest, last but not least, in Russian history. For Akhiezer the crucial algorithm is the schism (*raskol*). Russian society has always experienced itself as divided and in permanent crisis, which impeded the development of a ‘big society’ (comparable perhaps to Tönnies’ society as opposed to community) in Russia. Akhiezer can be considered a theorist of Russian cultural crisis who even unmasks the Soviet era as a pseudo-big-society. His design, however, avoids the use of the parameters of the historiosophies of the nineteenth century which were exploited so skillfully by the Russian liberal intellectuals (see the article by Narskij). His logic of binary oppositions rather follows a structuralist approach. Similar to representatives of the Moscow and Tartu schools of semiotics, as Swiderski points out, Akhiezer proves to be a true European thinker, not by his object of analysis but by his very line of reasoning.

Andrea Zink analyses the legal discourse in Dostoevsky’s novel *The Idiot*, a discourse connected intimately to the search for the Russian soul. Dostoevsky’s Prince Myškin proves in this way to be a very modern thinker who supports a critique of civilization based on the Western European prison system. Dostoevsky’s characters are far ahead of their time. In their criticism of the supposedly humane European forms of punishment, i.e. the function of prisons and the operation of the guillotine, they even preempt Foucault’s study of prisons. On closer inspection, the ‘Russian soul’ itself appears as the unconscious of an individual educated in Western Europe, the sensitive and deranged prince Myškin.

Despite his national mood then, Dostoevsky the artist carries on a relentless, critical and intensive dialogue with Europe. The supposed Russian exceptionalism is not an isolated path (see the articles by Čerepanova and Sartorti). And this quality is finally reflected in the respect Dostoevsky’s novels are afforded both in Western European countries and in the current Russian debate on the abolition of the death penalty.

Russia does not have patent on the idea of exceptionalism, as Rozalija Čerepanova makes clear in her article. In fact, Russian exceptionalism, like all other special cases, is also a deviation from the normal, in this case the (Western) European path. Russia is a realm in which Western desires are satisfied (see Zink’s contribution). It serves, above all else, as a testing ground for Western, anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist ideas. The Russian state, which is understood to be a cultural medium and cultural mediator in the tradition of enlightened European

monarchies, plays an unusual role in this process. Surprisingly, this attitude can be identified well into the nineteenth century. Making use of the (un)favorable situation, that is the first crisis of capitalism and the first revolutions in Europe, the Russian state continues to perform its educational duties and the self-understanding of the enlightened monarchy becomes intertwined with the idea of exceptionalism. Culture, especially morality and education were stressed in Russian society, in contrast to Western European rationality, egoism, and capitalist economics. The slow pace of government's 'civilizing measures' is, like the reluctant mission of the liberals (see Narskij's contribution), born of the fear that the educational program could be completed successfully and produce a genuinely enlightened people.

Konstantin Bogdanov deals with the geopolitical dreams expressed in the second edition of the Soviet encyclopedia, that is, with Soviet Russia's cartographic positioning in Europe. In the medium examined, Russia is conceived cartographically on physical maps (and not economically as it was after the revolution) as the center of (global) civilization. A cultural model is thereby designed as a model of space, which functions on the basis of the topology of center and periphery. This concentric arrangement of the world gained its impulse as early as the 1920s in the slogan of capitalist encirclement. It persisted into the Stalin era. Although the exceptionalism of the nineteenth century featured a spatial approach, the Soviet cartographic project, represents an inversion of the "special path": the European part of Russia is the center of Europe and the world. As a result, the old view of the world is replaced, according to which Russia was "different" from Europe. The 'false' universalism of Stalinist ideology, the Soviet pseudo-Big-Society (see the contributions of Jubara and Swiderski) manifests itself in this way. The fairy-tale characteristics of the map were eventually reflected in the narrative development and spatial conceptualization of the Stalinist Constitution of 1936. (See the article by Schmid).

Ulrich Schmid reads the many Russian/Soviet constitutions of the twentieth century (1918/1924, 1936, 1977 and 1991) as narratives and, moreover, as a genre in a Bakhtinian sense, i.e. as cultural and world models of their era. According to Schmid, the first post-revolutionary constitutions still adhered to the rules of drama. They were committed to the struggle against capitalism, and must therefore engage in a contest with Western Europe, not least of all because they adopt as a model, for all of their anti-bourgeois rhetoric, a constitution born of the bourgeois revolution in France. The peaceful idyll of the Stalin era (for Schmid a story-book period), which is expressed programmatically in the 1936 Constitution, is very different. The isolationist, but also abstract and therefore pseudo-universalist character of the era comes to expression here (see the contributions of Jubara, Swiderski and Bogdanov). Dialogue with Europe—at least in the official culture model—is interrupted and the progress of Russian culture, its new youth, is determined only in comparison to its own history. Schmid also sees these isolationist tones in the constitution promulgated in 1993 which is still valid today, although it, too, is based on the French and, to a lesser extent, German model. With respect to a common horizon of understanding (see the article by van der Zweerde), Schmid's contribution numbers among the more skeptical articles in this volume.

Ol'ga Nikonova investigates the history and function of a state prescribed cultural program: Russian and Soviet patriotism. In contrast to philosophical concepts (see the article by van der Zweerde) the apparently easy translatability and longevity as well as the continued relevance of a cultural discourse becomes evident in this contribution. Originating in the 'cradle of the West', the Greek polis, and having originally been imported to Russia from Germany during the Enlightenment, the patriotism of the nineteenth century itself serves to demonstrate the European character of Russia's elite, and indeed the entire empire (see the article by Čerepanova). Colonized Asia—and even its lower social classes—was to be civilized in European fashion through patriotism. Patriotism was seen as the appropriate educational program. While Lenin, as a member of the cultural elite, like the liberal intellectuals of the nineteenth century (see Narskij's contribution), only temporarily relied on a watered-down version of the patriotic mobilization of the masses—and enjoyed for this reason the respect of Russian émigrés—Stalin used the patriotic discourse to heal the Soviet fatherland of all its remaining 'backwardness'. Only at this point does patriotism, despite its oxymoronic structure, become effective on a mass scale. The recent upswing of patriotism in post-socialist Russia and reunified Germany demonstrates the flexibility of this European cultural concept.

Rosalinde Sartorti's article illuminates visually realized 'exceptionalism' (see Čerepanova's and Zink's contributions) as it is supported and aided by iconographies and exhibition catalogs. The Russian landscape, especially the forest, as it was depicted by the so-called Itinerants (*Peredvižniki*) of the nineteenth century, was used as a means of creating a national, collective identity.

At the same time, the question remains as to what can be read in the pictures. Certain interpretations of the images have prevailed, and in this way certain patterns of interpretation of these images have been indelibly stamped into the collective memory. Conversely, these 'pictures' have also influenced the perception of the environment. The political instrumentalization of (the painting of) landscapes (see the article by Bogdanov) is not unique to Russia, and should be viewed as a European phenomenon of the nineteenth century.

The authors of this volume come to very different findings with regard to the original question as to Russia's proximity to Europe or its distance from the rest of the West. Yet what should be evident is that discourses are on the move and it might be worthwhile to track them onto yet other levels and into further fields. By doing this, the traditional view of Russia 'from outside' might be broken up and Russia may be able to gain a new perception as closer to and even within the boundaries of Europe.

References

- Edmondson, L. H. (Ed.). (2001). *Gender in Russian history and culture (Studies in Russian and East European history and society)*. Palgrave: Basingstoke et al.
- Figes, O. (2002). *Natasha's dance. A cultural history of Russia*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Groys, B. (1995). *Die Erfindung Russlands*. München: Carl Hanser Verlag.
- Gurevič, A. Ja. (2001). *Russkaja kul'tura kak issledovatel'skaja problema*. Moskva: Nauka.

- Kelly, C., & Shepherd, D. (Eds.). (1998). *Constructing Russian culture in the age of revolution: 1881–1940*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Marsh, R. (1998). *Women and Russian culture: Projections and self-perceptions (Studies in Slavic literature, culture, and society, version 2)*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Miliukov, P. (2006). *Outlines of Russian culture*. New Orleans: Hesperides Press.
- Murašov, J., & Witte, G. (Eds.). (2003). *Die Musen der Macht. Medien in der sowjetischen Kultur der 20er und 30er Jahre*. München: Fink.
- Nivat, G. (2007). *Vivre en russe*. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme.
- Rosslyn, W., & Tosi, A. (Eds.). (2007). *Women in Russian culture and society*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rzhevsky, N. (Ed.). (1999). *The Cambridge companion to modern Russian culture [Cambridge companions to culture]*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Uffelmann, D. (2010). *Der erniedrigte Christus: Metaphern und Metonymien in der russischen Kultur und Literatur*. Wien et al.: Böhlau.
- Vinitsky, I. (2009). *Ghostly paradoxes: Modern spiritualism and Russian culture in the age of realism*. Toronto: Toronto et al.: University of Toronto Press.
- Volkov, S. (2008). *The magical chorus: A history of Russian culture from Tolstoy to Solzhenitsyn*. New York: Knopf.
- Wachtel, B. A., & Vinitsky, I. (2009). *Russian literature (cultural history of literature)*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Wolff, L. (1994). *Inventing Eastern Europe: The map of civilization on the mind of the enlightenment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.