THE PROBLEM
OF OLD RUSSIAN CULTURE

BY GEORGES FLOROVSKY

Die wahre Kritik liegt im Verständnis.
Bachofen, Antiquarische Briefe

I. THE PATTERN OF INTERPRETATION

There was, in Russian historiography of the last century, an established pattern of interpretation, and, to some extent, it is still commonly used. It was traditional to divide the history of Russia into two parts, and to divide it sharply and rigidly: the Old and the New, Ancient and Modern. The time of Peter the Great was regarded as the Great Divide, as the decisive turning point in the total process. Of course, it was much more than a chronological demarcation. Passionate value judgments were implied therein. Kliuchevsky has rightly stated: "The whole philosophy of our history was often reduced to the appraisal of Peter's reform; by a certain scholarly foreshortening, the whole problem of the meaning of Russian history was condensed into one single question—about the deed of Peter and the relation of his new reformed Russia to the old." The Old Russia was regarded and evaluated in the perspective of the New, in the light of "the Reform." In fact, this approach was itself an integral part of the Reform, and its most ponderous legacy. This pattern of interpretation was first invented by the pioneers of the Reform in order to justify the break, which was intended to be radical and definitive, and then it was maintained in its defense. The story of Old Russia had to be presented in such a way as to show that the Reform was inevitable, necessary, and just. "The Old" meant in this connection the obsolete, sterile and stagnant, primitive and backward. And "the New" was depicted, by contrast, in the brightest colors as a great achievement and a glorious promise. The whole history of Old Russia, before Peter, was usually treated as a kind of prehistory—a dark background against which the whole splendor of the new cultural

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1 В. О. Ключевский, Курс русской истории, Part IV, lecture 68, in Сочинения, IV (Moscow, 1958), 201.
awakening could be spectacularly presented; or as a protracted period of infancy and immaturity, in which the normal growth of the nation was inhibited and arrested; or else as a lengthy preparation for that messianic age which had finally descended upon Russia, under Peter and by his sovereign will, from abroad if not from above. “History,” in the proper sense of the word, was supposed to have begun in Russia only with Peter. It was assumed that only at his time did Russia enter the stage of history and civilization—indeed as a belated newcomer, sorely delayed in development, and thereby destined to tarry for a long time in the humble position of a learner, in the commonwealth of cultured nations.

There were manifold variations on this basic theme in Russian historiography. For our immediate purpose it would suffice to quote but one of them. Sergius M. Soloviëv had the reputation of a sober historian, and he well deserved the praise. His monumental History of Russia from the Oldest Times is still the most reliable survey of the subject, well documented and skillfully arranged. It is highly significant that Soloviëv simply loses his temper when he comes to the times of Peter, to the Reform. About Peter he writes in a very special style, passionate, nervous, and pathetic, at once elevated, ornate, and excited. It is the style of heroic legend. Indeed, for Soloviëv, Peter was the hero of Russian history, probably the only hero, and the last one. “Only Christian faith and the nearness in time saves us—and still incompletely—from the cult of this demigod and from the mythical conceptions about the exploits of this Hercules.” Peter was almost a supernatural being. “The period of heroes comes to its end with the coming of civilization.” Peter concludes the epic period of Russian history and opens

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2 С. М. Соловьев, История России в древнейших временах, XIV, chap. ii (St. Petersburg, n.d.: «Общественная Польза»), Book III, cols. 1057-58: “Обширное иную, кипящее в ней невероятными силами, произвело исполнину, как имена земли в допотопное врея приводила славу обеспечения своей славы, славу кото́рых приводит в изумление наш мелкий род… Древственная страна предшествовала такою обширной попришечке, длиа богатых поседел викингов рода”; cf. XXII, chap. v, Book V, col. 542: “Kto-to sil'nyi, neobyknovenyyi iavlil'sia, proshel, ostavil neizgladimye sledы, porazil vobrazhenie, ovalal pamiat'ju naroda. Vsero dla liudei chutkhikh, ispolnennikh sily, shishalis' slova: ‘Idi za mnou, vremja nastupilo!’” It must be noted, however, that in his Public Lectures on Peter the Great (1872) Soloviëv seems to be more cautious and reserved on this point. “Great men” should not be isolated from their environment, from the nation, and should not be regarded as miraculous or supernatural beings: they are children of their age and embody the hidden urges of the nation. Soloviëv then stresses the inevitability of historical development, the rhythm of history, the necessary stages of the process. Yet the general scheme of interpretation is still the same. There are two stages, or ages, of national life: in the first the life of the nation is dominated and guided by “feeling”—the period of youth, of strong passions and movements, the time of fire. And yet it is the time of immaturity, as vigorous as the energy may be. The nation must come of age, or perish. In the second stage its life is ruled by reason, or by thought. Everything is subjected to doubt. There are dangers in these awakenings, in the transition from superstition to unbelief. Nevertheless, it is a step forward. Western Europe passed into the mature age, the age of thought, at the time of the Renaissance. Russia did the same two centuries later. In fact,
the era of civilization for Russia. It means that for Solov’ev there was no civilization in Russia before Peter, even if there was an enormous dynamic potential—in the state of chaotic fermentation. The change under Peter was most radical: from epic to history—from prehistory to history proper. Only since Peter has Russia become an “historic” nation.

There is in this interpretation a striking discrepancy between the political and the cultural course of the process. The political history of Russia was continuous from the very beginning, through the Reform—in spite of its cataclysmic character—up to the present. Old Russia was just a stage in the formation of the definitive Russian Empire. The unity of Russian history is seen precisely in the history of the Russian state. On the other hand, there is a radical discontinuity in the history of Russian culture. The culture of Old Russia has been simply dismissed, and it is assumed that it had to be dismissed and discarded, and replaced by another. It was not a link in the continuous chain. There was rather no such continuous chain at all. The true Russian culture had to be created afresh; actually, it had to be imported. As Solov’ev phrased it himself, “It was the turn of the Russian people to serve a foreign principle.”

The true history of Russian culture is, from this point of view, the history of Western culture in Russia. Old Russia was contrasted with the New as a “primitive society” with the “civilized.” Many Russian historians of the last century were using these and similar phrases. Theodore I. Buslaev, one of the great founders of Russian historical philology, could not find in Old Russia any trace of genuine culture: no intellectual curiosity, no aesthetic vision, no literary skill. There was no dynamism, no advance whatever. In the same vein, A. N. Pypin would contend that actually there was almost no “chronology” in the history of Old Russian literature. For Buslaev the whole period of Russian history up to Peter could be characterized by two words: “primitivism” (pervobytnost’) and “stagnation” (velikoe kosnenie russkago naroda). From this point of view, Old Russian culture was to be studied by archaeologists, not by historians. Indeed, it was under the guise of “Russian antiquities” that the history of Old Russian culture was studied in the last century. The term “culture” is often used in a wider sense to include “primitive cultures.” In that sense one could also speak of Old Russian culture, but only in that sense. It was a field for antiquaries, not for historians.

only at this point of transition does real history begin, although it is possible only on the basis of what had been accumulated or created in the age of feeling. There is, in Solov’ev’s vision of history, a peculiar blending of Hegelianism and the motives of the Enlightenment: belief in general laws of history and worship of knowledge and critical thinking. See «Публичная чтение о Петре Великом», Сочинения Сергея Михайловича Соловьева (St. Petersburg, 1882), pp. 88 ff.


3 6. И. Васильев, «Объяснение о русской нивописи» (1866), Сочинения, I (St. Petersburg, 1908), pp. 3-4, 21, 29, 32.
The line of Russian cultural development was not merely bent but really broken. The old order had passed away. Old Russia was a dead world. It had to be admitted, however, that the Reform, as radically as it had been conceived from the beginning, was not accomplished at once. The old world was terribly shaken, but it did not disappear. Much of the old order survived, but only beneath the level of "civilization" in those strata of the nation which resisted the Reform and attempted an escape. But these strata were, in a sense, outside history, and it had to be hoped that finally, with the spread of "enlightenment," they would also be dragged in. What remained from the old order was no more than "survivals." As Pypin said, "The life of the small civilized class was surrounded by the element of old custom." All survivals were actually in the realm of customs and routine, in that realm which is denoted by the untranslatable Russian word, byt. But byt, at its best, is no more than a dead mask of culture. The Reform had split the nation into two parts: the civilized elite and the masses. It was in the masses that relics of Old Russia had been preserved. It was assumed that in good time they would be completely discarded.

It has been commonly assumed that culture had to be autonomous, that is, secular. The whole history of European civilization was usually presented in this way—as a story of progressive emancipation of culture from the stiffening control of the established religion, or of the Church. This scheme of interpretation was derived partly from the philosophy of the Enlightenment, partly from Positivism. It has been faithfully applied to Russian history also. By this criterion the whole history of Old Russia was summarily discredited in advance. Indeed, the major charge that has been raised against Old Russia is that its life was dominated by religion, enslaved in the dogmatic and ritual forms. There was little room in this old structure for criticism and free search. Very often "culture" was simply identified with "criticism." There was little understanding of its organic aspect. Only critical trends, within the established structure, could have had, from this point of view, any cultural significance. Accordingly, it was among the dissenters or non-conformists of various types that signs or tokens of potential cultural awakening were looked for, just as it was the fashion at one time to discover forerunners of modern times in the heretical and rebellious groups in the Middle Ages. Peter's Reform itself was warmly appraised as a deed of liberation from the control of religion. The concept of a "religious culture" was for the historians of the last century at least a paradox, and for most an obsolete dream and an ominous threat.

The vision of the contemporary historian has been drastically en-

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5 А. И. Пыпин, «До-Петровское предание в XVIII-м веке», Воспоминания Европы, July, 1886, pp. 350 ff.; cf. Николай Трубецкой, О народной поэзии в общежитием и литературной общей первой трем и XIX века (St. Petersburg, 1912), chap. 1, pp. 1-3.
larged in recent decades. The fiction of "unchanging Russia," ever the
same for several centuries, in which many historians of older genera-
tions were still able to believe, has crumbled. One is bound to distin-
guish ages and stages. "Old Russia" appears to be an artificial and un-
historical concept. One must speak rather of various local cultures—of
Ancient Kiev, of Novgorod, Tver, Moscow, and the like, and of Western
Russia. These local cultures were, of course, interrelated and ultimately
integrated into one great national culture. But first of all they must be
understood in their distinctive characters. Some regional studies in the
field of Old Russian culture were initiated already in the last century,
and a number of provocative observations were accumulated. But
much has been left undone. On the other hand, there was in these
regional studies a tendency to overemphasize local distinctions. In any case,
it is still too early to attempt a synthetic description of Old Russia as a
whole. Obviously, there were deep internal tensions within the realm
of Old Russian culture. The cultures of all societies are more or less
stratified: there are always different levels, and high culture is always
kept and promoted by a minority, the leading and creative elite. The
problem is much more intricate and complex than was admitted by the
historians of earlier generations.

The time has come when the story of Old Russia must be carefully
revised and probably rewritten. This time it must be written as a
history in its own right, and not just as a preamble to the history of
New Russia. Of course, historical interpretation is inevitably retrospec-
tive—that is the very heart of the historical method. It was inevitable to
look back at Old Russia. What was wrong in the traditional pattern was
not the retrospection itself but the unfortunate selection of the observa-
tion point—and also the lack of congeniality with the subject of study.

The term "culture" is ambiguous; it is currently used in more than
one sense. On the one hand, "culture" is a descriptive term. It denotes
the structure of a particular society or of a particular group. Culture in
this sense includes at once a certain set of aims and concerns and a
complex of established habits. There is always an element of normative
routine in any given culture, but culture is maintained only by exer-
cise, by an active pursuit of certain goals. On the other hand, culture is
a system of values. Of course, these values are produced and accumu-
lated in the creative process of history in a particular environment and
setting, and in this respect they are inevitably situation-conditioned.
And yet they always tend to obtain a quasi-independent existence, that
is, they become independent of that original historical context in which
they came into being. Cultural values always claim universal recogni-
tion. Though they are rooted in their native soil, cultural values can be
transplanted. This transfer of cultural systems is one of the major
events of history. Cultures and societies are not identical. Societies
may collapse and even disappear completely, but their cultures do not always perish with them. The most conspicuous example is ancient Greece. One can speak of its permanence in the life of other societies. Great creations of thought, charity, art, and letters may retain their intrinsic validity, even if there is nobody to appreciate them or if they are vigorously disavowed and repudiated in a particular group and at a particular time. There is always some prospect of recovery and revival. True values are perennial.

There are two different tasks for the historian of culture, although it is difficult to separate them in practice. On the one hand, there is a descriptive task. One has to establish an accurate inventory of those cultural values which are accepted and circulated in a given society at particular stages of its historical life. One must also find out in what particular manner they functioned in this society, and whether they were really living values and not just an external garb or a conventional decorative frame. It may happen that some of the accepted values are discredited in a particular society at a given date and cease to function. It may also happen that society itself degenerates and loses its cultural vitality. It may prosper; it may decay. And the historian must accurately record all the stages of the process. On the other hand, there is the task of interpretation. The complex of values can be studied as such. Thus we speak, for instance, of classical civilization. The fall of the classical world did not discredit classical civilization. One may speak at the same time of the corruption of imperial Rome and of the immortal glory of Roman law.

Let us return now to the problem of Old Russian culture. It may be true that Old Russia was not successful in her cultural endeavor, that her cultural effort resulted ultimately in a deadlock. Indeed, historians are never permitted to idealize the subject of their studies. Yet the historic collapse of Old Russia, accelerated by the intervention of new forces, does not by itself prove the inconsistency of that culture to which Russia was pledged and addicted. This culture must be examined in its inner structure, apart from its historic fate. These two different lines of research, in which different methods must be used, were unfortunately often confused by the historians.

II. THE WAYS OF OLD RUSSIA

Old Russia stood in a very definite cultural succession. She was in no sense isolated in the cultural world. She entered the commonwealth of civilized nations when she was christened by the Byzantine. She received then, together with the Christian faith, an impressive cultural dowry—a complex of cultural values, habits, and concerns. The Byzantine inheritance of ancient Kiev was conspicuous. The city itself was an important cultural center, a rival of Constantinople, an adornment
of the empire. It was not the only center: Novgorod in any case must be mentioned. The literary production of the Kievian period was intense and diverse. Russian art was also taking shape. Behind the documents of the time we cannot fail to discern cultural activity, cultural forces. We discern groups and individuals eagerly committed to various cultural tasks. The movement of ideas has already begun.

The Kievian achievement must be regarded in a wider perspective. It was an integral part of the incipient Slavic culture. V. Jagić once suggested that in the tenth century there was a chance that Slavic civilization might have developed as a third cultural power, competing with the Latin and the Greek. The Bulgarian literature of the Simeonic age was already so rich and comprehensive as to stand comparison with the Byzantine. Indeed, it was the same Byzantine literature, but already indigenized. This cultural promise was curtailed and frustrated. The great cultural impetus was checked. Yet the promise was real, and the actual achievement was by no means negligible. Of course, this incipient Slavic civilization was deeply rooted in the Byzantine tradition, just as Western culture was rooted in the traditions of the classical world. But it was more than a repetition or an imitation. It was an indigenous response to the cultural challenge. And it was mainly from Bulgaria that a rich supply of literary monuments was transferred to Kiev and other centers. Cultural taste and skill were formed. Cultural interests were aroused. Kievian Russia was not isolated from the rest of the Slavic world, as it was not separated from Byzantium and the West, or from the East. Kievian Russia was able to respond conscientiously to the cultural challenge. The ground was already prepared.

At this point certain doubts may be reasonably raised. First of all, the promise was actually frustrated, even if the measure of this frustration and lack of success should not be exaggerated. Was this due only to adverse conditions—the Germano-Latin pressure on the Western Slavs, the defeat of Bulgaria by the Greeks, the Mongolian conquest of Russia? Or was there an inherent weakness, a constitutional disease, that arrested the development both in Old Russia and in the Balkans? The adversity of external conditions was bound to have at least a psychological impact on the whole cultural situation, but further questions may be asked, and indeed have been asked, by modern scholars. Was the Byzantine inheritance a healthy one? Was the task undertaken by the Slavs sound and reasonable? Was their attempt to create a new national culture a sound enterprise? Or was it doomed to failure by its inner inconsistency? The questions were sharply put, and answers were often negative.

V. Jagić, Historija Književnosti Naroda Hrvatskoga i Srbskoga, Vol. 1.: Stara doba (Zagreb, 1867), pp. 52, 66.
It was inevitable that in the beginning the cultural elite should have been small, and the outreach of its activity rather limited. It was development at a normal pace. But was the Byzantine civilization really “received” in Old Russia? Golubinsky, for one, bluntly denied the fact. St. Vladimir wanted to transplant culture to his land, but his effort failed completely. Culture was brought in and offered but not taken, and, as Golubinsky added, “almost immediately after its introduction it disappeared without leaving any trace.” Until Peter’s time there was no civilization in Russia. There was no more than plain literacy, that is, the skill to read and to copy texts. Literacy, not literature, was the upper limit of Old Russia, according to Golubinsky. “Literacy, not culture—in these words is summarized all our history for the vast period from Vladimir to Peter the Great.” Before Peter, Russians were, on the whole, quite indifferent to culture and enlightenment—prosveshchenie was Golubinsky’s own term. Those few contradictory instances which he had to acknowledge, Golubinsky would hastily dismiss as incomprehensible riddles.\footnote{E. Golubinskii, История русской церкви, 1/1 (2nd ed.; Moscow, 1901), pp. 701 ff., 720.} No contemporary historian would dare to endorse these sweeping generalizations of Golubinsky. But under some other guise they are still repeated. It must be noted that Golubinsky in no sense held the Greeks responsible for the Slavic failure. He never contested the value of Byzantine civilization. He only felt that probably the Byzantine offered too much at once, and also expected too much from the newly baptized nations. The fault was with the Russians themselves. Some others, however, would shift the blame to Byzantium. According to Jagić, the greatest misfortune of the Slavs was that they had to be reared in the school of senility: a young and vigorous nation was to be brought up on the decrepit culture of a moribund world that had already lost its vitality and creative power. Jagić was quite enthusiastic about the work of the Slavic Apostles. He had only praise for their endeavor to stimulate indigenous culture among the Slavs. But he had no appreciation for Byzantine civilization. This attitude was typical of his generation, and also of the next. The failure was then inevitable: one cannot build on a rotten foundation. There was no genuine vitality in the Old Slavic civilization, because there no longer was living water in the Byzantine springs. Seemingly there was a promise, but actually there was no hope.

The charge has been repeated recently in a new form. Quite recently the late Professor George Fedotov suggested that the cause of Old Russian backwardness, and indeed the tragedy of Russian culture at large, was precisely the attempt at indigenization. He had serious doubts about the benefits of the use of the Slavic vernacular. Having received the Bible and a vast amount of various religious writings in their own language, the Slavs had no incentive to learn Greek, for translations
once made were sufficient for immediate practical needs. They were enclosed, therefore, within the narrow limits of an exclusively religious literature. They were never initiated into the great classical tradition of Hellenic antiquity. If only our ancestors had learned Greek, speculated Professor Fedotov, they could have read Homer, could have philosophized with Plato, could have reached finally the very springs of Greek inspiration. They would have possessed a golden key to classical treasures. But this never happened. Instead they received but one Book. While in Paris, a poor and dirty city as it was in the twelfth century, the Schoolmen were already discussing high matters, in the golden and beautiful Kiev there were but monks engaged in writing chronicles and lives of saints. In other words, the weakness and backwardness of Old Russia depended upon that narrow foundation, exclusively religious, on which its culture had been built. The charge is by no means new. The lack of classical tradition was often emphasized as one of the peculiar and distinctive features of Old Russian culture. Fedotov’s imaginary picture is pathetic, but is his argument fair and sound? The West seems to have had the golden key of Latin. How many in the West, however, were using that key for the purpose of which Fedotov speaks? And was the Latin known at that time sufficient for the task? Classical values were transmitted rather indirectly through Christian literature. Platonism was accessible through Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa. It could be no less readily discovered in Byzantine ecclesiastical sources. The Christian Hellenism of Byzantium neither impresses nor attracts Fedotov. He has a twisted picture of Byzantium: Byzantine Christianity appears to him to be a “religion of fear,” of phobos; human values were suppressed in it. Anyhow, Fedotov contended that Kievan Russia never accepted this grim version of Christianity and developed its own conception: humanitarian and kenoetic. And, in fact, that picture of Kievan Russia which Professor Fedotov himself has given us in his impressive book, *The Russian Religious Mind*, is bright and moving. Kievan Christianity, in his appraisal, has perennial value: “that of a standard, a golden measure, a royal way,” in his own phrase. Indeed, we are given to understand that its attainments were so high because the Russians did not follow either the Byzantines or the Bulgarians, because they created their own Christian vision and way. In any case, it appears that Kievan Russia was vigorous and creative—at least in one field. What is more significant, basic human values were firmly established, high ethical standards acknowledged, and personal initiative disclosed and encouraged. There was strong human impetus in the Kievan culture. One

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has to assume, as was indeed Fedotov’s own contention, that cultural growth and advance were impeded at a later stage. The absence of the classical tradition probably was not so tragic and fatal.

There is an increasing tendency in modern historiography to idealize the Russian beginnings. The Kievan period is depicted as a kind of golden age, a golden legend of Russia. Dark times came later—after the Mongolian conquest. There was a visible decline in literary production, and there were no outstanding personalities in this field. A closer scrutiny of extant sources, however, corrects this first impression. Writers of that time, from the twelfth century to the fifteenth, are aware of problems with which they are wrestling—the problems of the artistic craft: problems of style and representation, problems of psychological analysis. There were in Russia at that time not only scribes and nachetchiks, but true writers. There were not only skillful craftsmen but real masters in art. The recent studies of D. S. Likhachev are very suggestive, especially his analysis of the problem of man in the literature and art of Old Russia.\footnote{Л. С. Лихачев, Человек в литературе древней Руси (Moscow-Leningrad, 1958): Некоторые задачи изучения второго южнославянского влияния в России (Moscow, 1958).} Behind the stylistic devices used by the artists one can detect their spiritual vision, and this vision was the fruit of reasoning and contemplation. The new wave of the “South Slavic” impact did not mean just a transfer of new literary documents, mainly translations, of spiritual and hagiographical content. It was a wave of inspiration, a deep spiritual movement, stemming from the great Hesychast tradition, revived at that time both in Byzantium and in the restored Bulgarian kingdom. Both writers, chroniclers and hagiographers, and painters, including the iconographers, were fully aware of the problem that they had to wrestle with—the presentation of human personality. It may be true that their concept of personality and character was different from the modern view, and probably at this point their insight was deeper. They did not depict fixed characters; they saw men in process obsessed and confronted with problems, in the state of decision and indecision. One may speak almost of their “existentialist” approach to the problem of man. One may contend that psychology based on the concept of temptation, inner struggle with the passions, conversion and decision, was a deeper psychology than that which would deal with the fixed character. In any case, it is more dynamic and less in danger of falling into schematism of characteristic types. In the great Russian art of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries one discovers not only a high level of artistic mastery but also deep insights into the mystery of man. And this art was not only produced at that time but appreciated. Obviously, there was both a demand for this high art and an understanding of it, in circles which could not have been very narrow. It would not be an exaggeration to assume that the aesthetic culture of that time was
refined and profound. It was still a religious culture, but artistic
methods were adequate to the problem of revealing and interpreting
the ultimate mysteries of human existence in all its unruly and flexible
complexity. The challenge probably came from outside—from Byzanti-
tium once more—but the response was spontaneous and creative. There
was more than dependence or imitation. There was real response.11

One may be tempted to regard precisely this “dark” period, the
period of intensive political and internecine strife, as the climax of Old
Russian culture. Indeed, Russian art definitely declined in the fif-
teenth and especially in the sixteenth century and lost its originality
and daring. The literary culture, however, was preserved on a high
level till the Time of Troubles, and even later. The ideological content
of literature became more comprehensive in the sixteenth century.
There was an enormous synthetic effort in various fields of culture at
that time. Strangely enough, it seems that precisely that synthetic effort,
powerful and dynamic as it was, was the most conspicuous sign and
symptom of decline, or at least of an internal crisis. The cultural in-
heritance of Moscow was rich and comprehensive enough to suggest the
idea of systematization. The great national state, aware and conscious
of its vocation or destiny, needed a culture of great style. But this cul-
ture had to be built up as a system. It was an ambitious and attractive
task. The plan “to gather together all books available in Russia,” which
was undertaken under Metropolitan Macary in the middle of the six-
teenth century, was probably a naïve and simplistic expression of a deeper
conception. The plan itself was deeply rooted in the awakened con-
sciousness of national greatness. But the vision was intrinsically static,
and there was in it more than just a reflection of political ambition.
There was a deeper urge for “establishment.” The overarching idea
was that of order. The danger to culture implied therein was probably
felt in certain quarters. It has been usual to emphasize the importance
of the conflict between the “possessors” and “nonpossessors” in the late
decades of the fifteenth and the early decades of the sixteenth century.
At one time the sympathy of the historian was rather on the side of St.
Nilus of Sora and the Trans-Volga Elders. It seems that now the sym-
pathy has been shifted to the other side. In any case, St. Joseph has won.
And the idea of an established order was his greatest commitment. In-
deed, he himself never speculated on the themes of culture. Nor, prob-
ably, did St. Nilus. But there is undoubtedly deep truth in the sugges-
tion that it was in the tradition of St. Nilus that the only promise of
cultural advance was available. Cultures are never built as systems, by
orders or on purpose. They are born out of the spirit of creative initia-
tive, out of intimate vision, out of spiritual commitment, and are only

11 This theme must be elaborated in detail with reference to the modern study. It is
enough to mention the recent works of Igor Grabar, V. N. Lazareff, M. Alpatov, etc.
maintained in freedom. It may be contended that Moscow missed its opportunity for cultural progress when it yielded to the temptation of building its culture on the social order of the day—po sotsial'nomu zakazu, as it were. The cultural capital of Moscow was not so meager and limited as has been often assumed. Even its technical equipment should not be minimized. The root of the cultural trouble and failure was in the pattern. One may use the word “utopia” in this connection. And one may specify this utopia as theocratic. But actually it was a kind of politico-cultural utopia, not in full conformity with the higher aspirations of the Christian man. Of course, the Christian conception is intrinsically bifocal: The community—the Church—is the form of Christian existence, but human personality is a supreme value. Man is a political being; but culture is built by creative individuals, and there is always the danger when it is oversystematized that it may degenerate into a routine. The weakness of the Moscow culture was not so much in the poverty of the content as in the failure of spirit.

The most disquieting question in the history of Old Russian culture is this: What was the reason for what can be described as its intellectual silence? There was a great art, and there was also an intensive creative activity in the political and social field, including ideological speculation. But surely nothing original and outstanding has been produced in the realm of ideas, theological or secular. It was easier to answer this question when it was assumed that Old Russia was simply primitive, slumbering and stagnant. But now we know that in many other respects Old Russia was able to attain a high level. Still one may be tempted by easy answers. It may be suggested, and actually has been suggested more than once, that the “Russian soul” was, by its inner constitution, rather speculative or intuitive than inquisitive, and that therefore the language of art was the only congenial idiom of self-expression. It may be suggested, on the other hand, that the “Russian soul” approached the mystery of Christian faith by way of charity and compassion and was therefore indifferent to the subtleties of theological speculation. It does not help very much if we try to collect scattered data indicating that a certain amount of philosophical information was available to people of Old Russia. A solid amount of patristic writings was indeed in circulation, but there is no proof that theological interest had been awakened. All easy formulas are but evasions. And the riddle remains. Moreover, all speculations that operate with the precarious concept of the “Russian soul” are utterly unsafe. Even if “national souls” do exist, they are made, shaped, and formed in history. For that reason they cannot serve as a principle of interpretation. Again, the character of the “Russian soul” has been so diversely described and defined as to require a thorough re-examination. It has been usual to emphasize the irrational aspect of Russian mentality and its constant lack of form. There is
enough evidence to the contrary. With adequate reason it has been contended that the “Russian soul” had always a strong feeling and understanding for order and form, and this specific insight was the root of its great aesthetic achievements. In its extreme expression it led to ritualism, to the worship of external forms. Kliuchevsky had much to say about the thrill of rite and habit when he attempted to explain the genesis of the great Russian raskol. And the same striving after orderliness has created in Russia what we call byt. Of course, it may be claimed that underneath the byt there was always chaos. Finally, we are left with an antinomy, with an unresolved paradox.

In the total perspective of Russian historical development the paradox is even more spectacular. In the later period, after the Reform, Russians have appeared to be probably one of the most intellectual nations in Europe, inwardly troubled by all “damned problems” of religion and metaphysics. Exercise in philosophy, of various shapes and shades, and commitment to theory and speculation were the distinctive mark of the Russian mind in the last two centuries. This striking phenomenon was usually explained by Western influence, direct and indirect. It was suggested that dormant curiosity had been awakened by the challenge of Western thought. One should ask at this point why this intellectual curiosity was not awakened by the challenge of Byzantine civilization, which was renowned and notorious for its unquenchable commitment to speculation, in a measure offensive for the sober taste and mind of the West. Byzantium was not only dogmatic, but ever searching and rather unquiet in its heart. Indeed, Byzantium knew the mystery of harmony and cosmic order. But it also knew the thrill of search and the “clouds of unknowing.” But Byzantine challenge did not awaken the alleged Russian soul.

The tragedy of Old Russia, which led to its inner split and impasse, was not a tragedy of primitivism or ignorance, as has been contended more than once. It was a tragedy of cultural aberration. The charge of Golubinsky and of Fedotov is valid to some extent, but they were unable to phrase it properly. One may suggest that Byzantium had offered too much at once—an enormous richness of cultural material, which simply could not be absorbed at once. The charm of perfection was tempting: should not the whole harmony be transplanted? The heritage was too heavy, and too perfect, and it was thrilling in its harmony, in its accomplishment. Art also requires training, but in this case training is probably more formal—the acquisition of technical skill. In the realm of the mind, training is indissolubly bound with the essence of

12 See the penetrating essay of V. Shchepkin, “L’Ame du Peuple Russe dans l’Art Russe,” in Le Monde Slave, May and June, 1928; the Russian text in Воля России, 1929, VIII-IX, X-XI, XII.
13 Ключевский, Курс..., Vol. III, lectures 54 and 55; cf. «Западное влияние в России XVII века: Историко-психологический очерк» (1897), in Очерки и Речи, 1912.
the task. In this realm questions are no less important than answers, and unresolved problems, the "perennial questions," are the real stimulus and token of mental advance. Old Russia seems to have been charmed by the perfection, completeness, and harmony of Byzantine civilization, and paralyzed by this charm. Once more it must be stressed that Russian Byzantium was not just a servile repetition but a new and peculiar version of Byzantine culture, in which one can discern a true creative power. Some years ago I inscribed the chapter of my book, *The Ways of Russian Theology*, dealing with Old Russia: "The Crisis of Russian Byzantinism," and have rephrased it in the text: "The crisis of Byzantine culture in the Russian spirit." The phrase was misunderstood by the critics and reviewers, or rather was not understood at all. I am willing to assume full responsibility for the vagueness: I should have explained my thought in a more explicit way. What I wanted to say then I am bound to repeat now. The crisis consisted in that the Byzantine achievement had been accepted, but Byzantine inquisitiveness had not. For that reason the achievement itself could not be kept alive.

The crisis became conspicuous in Moscow in the seventeenth century, in that great age of changes, shifts, and troubles in the Russian state and society. It was an age of great cultural confusion. Certain elements of Byzantine achievement were strongly challenged, including the traditional "symphony" of state and church. Moscow was moving hesitantly toward an increasing secularization of its political order. The impact of Western mentality was growing, first in the form of the new Kiev learning, which itself was an unfortunate hybrid of Polish and quasi-Byzantine factors. The spread of this pseudomorphic culture was felt at Moscow more as a shock or offense than as a challenge, and provoked only resistance along with blind imitation. There was a search, but it was a search for ready solutions. Probably it was a blind alley. And then came the Reform.

The ultimate tragedy was that the Reform itself was promoted in the same old manner. There was again the thrill of accomplishment or achievement. The spirit of the Reform was intrinsically utilitarian. There was again a charm—a charm of Western achievement, of Western habits and forms. Curiosity was aroused, but was it a sound and sober intellectual curiosity? The new civilization was accepted in its ready form, into which the life of the nation could not be fitted. There was an effect of astonishment, but no real awakening. The new culture was much less organic than the old one, and therefore even less spontaneous and creative. It is instructive that it was possible to present the whole history of Russian literature, including its ideological content, as a story of Western influence, as a story of consecutive waves of imported ideas and forms. Was the cultural initiative really awakened? One may have

very grave doubts. It is not surprising that a paradoxical resistance to
culture as such has been one of the vigorous trends in the new culture;
though it was to some extent provoked also by the thought of a West-
erner, Rousseau, it was deeply rooted in the psychology of “reformed”
Russians. Was not the way of simplicity higher than the way of culture?
Technical culture has indeed been transplanted. But did Reform pro-
mote any disinterested concern for higher culture? Was it a real ad-
vance in comparison with the culture of Old Russia? During the whole
modern period complaints were loudly voiced on this theme: there was
no genuine will for culture, although admiration and even respect for
culture were rather widespread. The root of the trouble was still the
same: Culture was still regarded as an order, as an achievement, as a
system. For that reason one could propagate the acceptance of foreign
forms; they were finished and ready to hand. Indeed, there was some-
times much vigor and also much obstinacy in this endeavor of adapta-
tion, and it could instill vitality into the products. The thrill of the
modern Russian culture is in its scattered explosions—the deeds of indi-
viduals. But there was no general culture. Moreover, the larger part of
the nation was not yet involved in the process, and was much more out-
side the culture, and thus outside history, than it had been in the days
of Old Russia. This was the sharpest objection against the new order in
comparison with the old, as Kliuchevsky has so eloquently phrased it.

So much can be said about the old “society.” Did this “unsuccess,” to
use the term of Wladimir Weidlé,\textsuperscript{15} discredit that system of cultural
values to which Old Russia was pledged and committed? Did this
system crumble also? It is not for the historian to answer this question.
It is a question for the philosopher. But the historian must insist that
there are perennial achievements in the inventory of Old Russian cul-
ture. The greatness of the Old Russian religious art is in our day widely
acknowledged, with understanding or simply by fashion. The vigor
and freshness and the profundity of the Russian religious quest, al-
though it seems to be often disguised by ritual formalism, is also in-
creasingly recognized. There were profound human values in this old
culture, as detached, as archaic, as exotic as it may appear to those
trained in the Western ways. And it becomes more and more evident
that Old Russian culture did, from its very inception, belong to the
wider circle—to the circle of that civilization which had been built, on
the composite basis of ancient classical culture, under the creative im-
 pact, and often under direct guidance and deep inspiration, of Christian
faith and mission.

Old Russia, indeed, left a precious legacy, at least in the realm of art.
At this point its “culture” survived its “paternal society,” and must be
studied as a perennial treasure in its own right.

\textsuperscript{15} Wladimir Weidlé, \textit{Russia: Absent and Present} (New York, 1952), pp. 15 ff.