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Russian Messianism: Third Rome, Revolution, Communism and After

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Vera Tolz

This book aims to explore manifestations of messianic ideas in Russian intellectual thought and to consider their impact on state policies and their popular resonance. Peter Duncan defines messianism as 'the proposition or belief that a given group is in some way chosen for a purpose. Closely linked to this is the view that the great suffering endured by the group will lead somehow to the redemption of the group itself and possibly of all humanity.' (p. 1). Analysing different trends in Russian messianism, the author distinguishes one that focuses on state power from another variation, which emphasises land and people. In the author's view, the first trend corresponds to the 'nationalist' view of messianism as Russian rule over others and is rooted in the concept 'Moscow, the Third Rome,' while the second trend is related to the 'universalist' idea of redemption through suffering and is reflected in the popular myth of Holy Rus.

The book starts by putting Russian messianism in a comparative perspective, as it discusses Jewish messianism, messianic movements in medieval Europe and messianic tendencies in nationalist movements in modern Europe. It then looks at the origins of Russian messianism in the monk Filofei's letter of 1511 to the Moscow Prince Vasily III, which developed the idea of Moscow as the Third Rome, and the sixteenth

and seventeenth century myth of 'Holy Rus' as the land of the ever suffering Russian people. The latter myth has been constantly reinforced by various invasions and other catastrophes and has thus acquired a broad popular resonance. Duncan's account of the early history of Russian messianism shows that messianic ideas, in particular the concept of 'Moscow, the Third Rome,' rarely informed the foreign policy of Russian rulers, which was usually driven by more pragmatic considerations.

The book then adopts a chronological approach, aiming to identify manifestations of messianism in the works and pronouncements of intellectuals and, to a lesser extent, politicians from the reign of Nicholas I, which began in 1825, to the present. The main focus is on the Brezhnev period, when many of the major intellectual currents of today first started to take shape and when attempts were first made to find a Russian identity distinctive from the Soviet one.

In conclusion, the author argues that, whereas messianic tendencies could be identified in nationalist movements of other European peoples post-1789, in the Russian case, the emphasis in messianic thought has been on the idea of redemption through suffering - a hardly surprising trend given the turbulent nature of Russian history. At the same time, the fact that Russia has been a major world power and that geographically it has been located at the border of Europe and Asia, gave Russian messianism further impetus. Thus the view was formulated that Russia 'protected humanity against threats emanating from both [Europe and Asia]' and paid 'a huge price in the process'. (p. 147). Popular in the 1970s as well as among present day Russian nationalists, this idea is also to be found in the works of the founding fathers of Russian nationalism in the early nineteenth century, in particular Alexander Pushkin. The mixture of what the author defines as a 'persecution complex' and 'the delusion of grandeur' has given rise to the paranoid streak in Russian nationalist thought. At the same time, in conclusion, the author once again forcefully reinforces the view that there is insufficient evidence to assume that Russian messianism has ever exercised a predominant influence on the formation and execution of state policies.

In my opinion, the book has two major weaknesses. First, the author tries to assess the positions of too many intellectual figures. This leads to the fact that the majority of them are treated in a very schematic and therefore uninformative way. Thus, Pushkin and Nikolai Gogol are allocated one paragraph each, Alexander Herzen, the founding father of 'Russian socialism,' receives two. The philosopher, Nikolai Berdiaev, whose pamphlet, *The Russian Idea*, Duncan mentions in the introduction as a forerunner of his own book, gets just a few very brief references. Each major intellectual movement or trend is usually discussed in a short section, often not longer than a page. The result is that in a relatively short book such a cataloguing approach leaves no space for analysis, but only for a mere record of facts. Moreover, it becomes difficult for a reader to draw his/her own conclusions on the fluctuations of Russian messianic thought in different periods of Russian history.

The second flaw is that the author fails to clearly distinguish between messianism defined 'as a belief that a given group is in some way chosen for a purpose' (p. 1) and a cornerstone of romantic nationalism that a nation can be defined by a particular mission. From the nineteenth century onwards, Russian nationalism has been predominantly romantic, the concept of a civic (political) nation is only currently beginning to take root in Russia. So, it is not surprising that the majority of Russian nationalists have pounded over what kind of mission(s) the Russians are destined to fulfil. The book records such pronouncements, and, as a result, it often reads as an account of Russian nationalism, rather than a specific study of Russian messianism. The author states that 'there has been some very good academic work on contemporary Russian nationalism in recent years. This study is different in that it seeks specifically to describe and account for Russian messianism.' (p. 4). Many parts of the book do not corroborate this statement. This is particularly true of the discussion of the period since the 1970s, in which a rather conventional description of Russian nationalist debates includes just occasional references to ideas that can conceivably be seen as messianic.

Having said that, it should be stressed that the book is based on a very large and comprehensive selection of primary sources and is, by and large, accurate in detail. It can therefore serve as a good reference work on different currents in Russian nationalism. Its broad historical approach helps to put the current debate on what Russia is/should be into historical perspective, thus allowing readers to judge to what extent current

political and economic conditions helped (or failed to help) stimulate the formation of a new Russian identity.

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[2]

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