

Understanding Russian Culture

A History of Russian Thought From the Enlightenment to Marxism, by Andrzej Walicki; translated from the Polish by Hilda Andrews-Rusiecka, *Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1979. xvii + 456 pp. \$25.00.*

EVALUATION OF ANDRZEJ WALICKI'S book requires rather more attention to the author's personal circumstances than would ordinarily be the case. He is listed on the dust jacket as professor in the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw; he has visited Britain and the United States several times and at length; he wrote the book in Poland, in Polish; he quotes Leszek Kolakowski, the distinguished Polish ex-Communist scholar now resident in England, and is thanked in the introduction to Kolakowski's *Main Currents of Marxism*. These and other details testify to Walicki's success in mastering the idiom of both sides of the Iron Curtain and in seeking to meet the requirements of being both a Polish citizen and a scholar conforming to recognized international standards (rather than being treated as an honorary scholar by Westerners who despise, pity, and overlook the politically necessary rubbish in such a person's work).

The scope of the book is indicated in the title; the purpose of the author stems from awareness "that a sympathetic understanding of Russian culture is of vital impor-

tance for the Poles." As these lines are written, everyone knows how fragile hopes based on such awareness may be. Walicki mentions several examples of Poles during the period when the nation was partitioned (1772-1918) who showed interest and sympathy for Russia, or aspects of Russian life. He has not a few precursors, but he is still the first to attempt a study of this breadth and extent. In case after case he is able to relate his Russians to Poles who had similar views or antecedents, and the perspective is valuable indeed. It must be added here that the translator has done an admirable job of carrying a Polish text dealing with Russia and often using Russian terms and proper nouns into English with few errors or infelicities. The English flows so smoothly one would not guess it to be a translation.

The story begins with the Enlightenment, the first year of the reign of Catherine II. After a few pages about the reign comes a discussion of Yakov Kozelsky, Dmitry Anichkov, and Semyon Desnitsky. As Walicki acknowledges, they "have only [recently] been rediscovered by Soviet scholars." He will persuade few that "neglect" of them has been "unjust." There are other problems: Kozelsky is said to have been a deist and not to have attempted to construct a system of natural theology. But deism characteristically was "natural theology" and no more. Desnitsky viewed "Britain rather than France as the home of philosophy"; Walicki implies that this opinion was an odd one, which came from a prolonged stay in Scotland; but Desnitsky may have been quite right, because the Enlightenment philosophy of the eighteenth century did originate in Britain and what France contributed was its popularizers. Finally, Desnitsky's social thought is alleged to have been "bourgeois in character." A few pages later the author turns to Nikolai Novikov, a figure of great contemporary importance and not requiring Soviet "rediscovery." He was interested in Freemasonry, which is said to be the product of the "disintegration of feudal society," but also "a specific secularized form of religious life" (a point then ex-

plained at some length, and well). By this point several strengths and weaknesses of the book have appeared and will appear again. There are occasional half-baked allusions to the alleged relation between the mode of production and given thinkers or thoughts; but they are not stressed or expanded upon, might be regarded as obligatory, and may be ignored. Much more important, the command of Western intellectual and other history may not be very solid; control of the religious side of the Russian tradition is clearly deficient. Since the religious tradition was all Russia had for most of its history, that is troublesome.

A few examples will be given, in reverse chronological order. (1) Alexander Herzen's interest in religion was, the author writes, partly the result of corresponding with Natalia Zakharina; no doubt, but partly also the result of all Russian history and specifically of the religious history of the previous reign, admirably analyzed by the late Father Georges Florovsky, whom the author in the preface mentions talking with, but never quotes. That may, it is true, be more than one can reasonably ask of a Warsaw resident. (2) In the reign of Nicholas I, the regime "handed over the teaching of philosophy to Orthodox theologians"; all of us can disapprove the banning of philosophy under that name (though it successfully masqueraded under other, surprising names), but the implication is that the assignment passed from competents to incompetents. That is quite wrong. Orthodox theologians were the only ones in Russia who knew any philosophy, having usually learned it in seminaries; a young man tussling with Kant in the 1830's found it to be over his head and declared he must find a seminarian to help him. (3) In the previous reign pietism, imported from Western Europe, swept much of the educated class and captivated Alexander I himself. The relation of pietism to "mysticism" (which it often emphatically was not), to the Holy Alliance the idea for which it spawned, and to the "combined ministry" of Education and Religious Affairs which the

emperor created to spread it everywhere, is nowhere mentioned, and the term itself (in the context at issue) is missing. (4) The notion of Sophia, the Holy Wisdom of God, was thought by Vladimir Soloviev to be close to the "mystical" (the word is often misused, as is common with many Marxists and indeed non-religious persons of all sorts) traditions of Eastern Christianity *because* "she was portrayed on an old ikon in Novgorod Cathedral." St. Sophia was the conception to which the greatest cathedral of the Byzantine Empire, in Constantinople, was dedicated, as was also the chief cathedral of Kiev, "Mother of Russian Cities," and many other churches. It is inconceivable that Soloviev did not know all that, and Walicki would have been wise to explain it all to the reader.

It has to be said that Walicki has made a serious effort to include treatment of religious thinkers and reactionaries (which have in common that they are anathema to Marxist-Leninists, though of course reputable Marxists of any kind will not ignore a subject because they disapprove of it). The author exaggerates the sharpness of the difference between rationalism and religiosity among Russian thinkers of the early nineteenth century (Chapter 4). But he brings to Chaadaev and the Slavophiles—on the latter he has written skilfully and at length—much knowledge and a determination to be fair. The same is true of Vladimir Soloviev, often thought to be Russia's best philosopher, indeed by some its only philosopher worthy of the name. Walicki is clearly not about to accept Soloviev as the "greatest," and implies that someone else is instead, and perhaps that is—Lenin? At least, if he thinks so, he is wise enough not to court the amusement such an assertion would bring in the West.

Sometimes Walicki can be very compressed: L.M. Lopatin "returned to the monadism of Leibniz and attempted to combine a dynamically conceived spiritualistic pluralism with a 'rational theism' in which God was interpreted as the 'monad of monads.' This metaphysical idealism, which its author called 'dynamic spiritualism' or a 'system of concrete

dynamism,' supplied the foundations of an ethical personalism emphasizing the activity and creative force of the human psyche." Here we find seven isms in two sentences, and what Lopatin actually thought remains clear as mud. But there is nothing objectionable. Take, in contrast, Mikhailovsky's dismissal of liberty: "by accepting the priority of social over political reform we relinquish the demand for further rights and greater freedom, acknowledging these to be *instruments for the exploitation of the people* and a further aggravation of our guilt" (italics added). This quotation is prefaced by Walicki's terse reference to the "fine article" from which it is drawn. He adds that there was a growing realization that English-style political freedom was bound up with capitalism, "which was felt to be a retrogressive step—at least in Russia." It is clear that the author is not prepared to distance himself from the Marxist charge that freedom is a weapon of bourgeois domination.

Mikhailovsky and others are here termed "populists," and there is much discussion of what populism was and how Marxists, and specifically Lenin, were related to it. Danielson, for example, was said to think Marxism compatible with populism; the probability is that he never thought in terms of any two such entities. As Walicki presents Lenin, he seems to have been the culmination and fulfillment of "populism"; and yet Walicki does not say or hint so, and of course no present-day Marxist-Leninist could. Walicki is not to be blamed for not challenging the usage by which Russian socialism is divided into heterodox "populism" and orthodox "Marxism" by Russians, followed by many Westerners. The irony, and the pity, is that he is probably better prepared to straighten out the confusion—which Richard Pipes began to do and became diverted to other things—than anyone else. The political obstacles to his so doing, however, are very great.

Walicki does not deserve criticism from Westerners for attempting to meet all the requirements mentioned at the start of the

review. I know of no reason to question his integrity or sincerity. But a good many readers of this book will not be prepared to sift the ideological ambiguities that attended its conception and execution and cast aside the compulsory dogmatics for the insightful and rewarding observations it contains.

Reviewed by DONALD W. TREADGOLD