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Giovanna Brogi Bercoff

Rus', Russia and National Identity: Another Voice¹

It could be argued that enough has already been written about the book edited by S. Franklin and E. Widdis, which has become the object of a lively discussion, a discussion where emotional reactions seem occasionally to dominate, even though the questions at stake deserve to be treated in a scholarly and dispassionate way. Understandably, these questions are not just “scholarly”; they are at the same time the depository of “proofs,” “arguments” or “counter-arguments” for sought after, imagined or historically real “self-identities.” Ironically, the discussion is about a book that is neither among the most important nor the best in the last years. A reader will find interesting pages and information here, but the authors often offer several different interpretations of the same fact, failing to provide proofs for the correct one. Let me mention the “Judas in the Russian lands” in the film *Aleksandr Nevskij*, which has nothing to do with the betrayal of Christ (p. 113): the Judas par excellence in Russia was (is?) Mazepa, who also passed to the “German” (Swedish) camp. The allusion to Ukrainian “mazepynstvo” is quite obvious in the film. As to the Ukrainian bank notes of the 1990s, I do not think that they lend themselves to a double interpretation, namely, as either “overlapping” Soviet Russian images or being a challenge to them (pp. 24–28): in my opinion, by 1996, they were already a “symbol of identity” of the new Ukrainian state and challenged the Soviet/Russian interpretation of the Kyivan past. Incidentally, the notes were considered state symbols already by Andrew Wilson in his book *The Ukrainians: Unexpected nation* (2001; cf. pp. 227–228). The Greek ruins on the same notes do suggest the 2000 year old history of the “Ukrainian lands”: this may be considered a manifestation of “silly” Ukrainian nationalism, but let us recall that the first person who stated the same idea for *Russia* was V. Tatishchev. Thus, today Russian myths of antiquity are as “silly” as the Ukrainian ones—although that is not often appreciated nor recognized as dangerous.

¹ This is a continuation of a discussion about Simon Franklin’s and Emma Widdis’ *National Identity in Russian Culture: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). See the initial review by Oleh S. Ilnytkyj: “A Thousand Years of ‘Russianness’?” *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue canadienne des slavistes* 47.1–2 (2005): 127–138. For the discussion, see: Charles J. Halperin, “Rus', Russia and National Identity,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue canadienne des slavistes* 48.1–2 (2006): 157–166; Oleh S. Ilnytkyj, “Reply to Charles J. Halperin (‘Rus', Russia and National Identity),” *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue canadienne des slavistes* 48.1–2 (2006): 167–172; Charles J. Halperin, “Reply to Oleh S. Ilnytkyj (‘Rus', Russia and National Identity),” *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue canadienne des slavistes* 48.1–2 (2006): 173–174.

Although the book contains only minor errors,² I am skeptical about its usefulness. It is a hybrid product of post-modernist and late-structuralist criticism, trying to unite various specialties, ranging from philology and language to history (spanning a time-frame from the early-medieval to the present), from modern cultural studies to questions of nation-building, not to mention issues of identity of the “self” and/or the “other.” As a result, the first surprise is that the book is ‘only’ 244-pages long. Brevity is often a virtue, but it can become a handicap when one tries to include everything just to suggest the endless contradictions and fluidity (as the editors say in the Preface) of all the parameters that make up “National Identity” and “Russian Culture.” It is hard to find a more difficult and broader subject in all of the human sciences, and to distil them into a short book requires enormous skill and clarity of vision. Unfortunately, the current book is a hybrid product designed for only a vaguely identified audience. Scholars will find it more or less useless because of the oversimplifications—and will treat the book as redundant. On the other hand, it is hard to recommend the book to non-specialists or students (the intended audience), since it lacks basic historical, cultural and linguistic data that might allow that type of reader to follow the culturological discourse that the editors tried to initiate. To give one example: B. Gasparov’s analysis of the linguistic situation in Old-Rus’, in Muscovy, and then in the empire, the USSR and even in contemporary Russia is hardly profitable for a student that has not taken courses in the history of the language and medieval literature, or digested books and articles by people like B. Uspenskii and V. Zhivov. On the other hand, for a specialist, Gasparov’s short overview of such radically different works (both in terms of language and socio-cultural background) as Monomakh, Epifanii the Wise, Avvakum, and Zyzanii only provides evidence of the superficiality of his approach. Devoting a paragraph to Zyzanii, whom Gasparov locates very vaguely in the “north” (as noted already in Ilnytzyj’s review), he potentially misleads the reader who might think that he is referring to Russia. At the same time Gasparov sidesteps the fundamental fact that Zyzanii was a product of Ruthenian Orthodox culture in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the end of the sixteenth century—and, therefore, certainly not a Russian writer. Such failures to distinguish accurately the historical circumstances mean to distort reality and identity; it betrays a bias in favour of the idea that the eastern Slavic cultural space is uniquely “Russian,” with Moscow the spiritual and political centre. In a word, one of the most complicated problems of European history is simplistically and superficially treated.

Be that as it may, this is only one example of how poorly difficult problems are treated in this book. Since the subject of “good intentions versus execution” came up in the Halperin-Ilnytzyj discussion (p. 169), it may be useful to underscore that Ilnytzyj is certainly right when he stresses that the former is not enough. It was the responsibility of the editors to make much clearer that Old Rus’ and Russia are not

² Why translate Herzen’s *Kto vinovat?* as *What is to be done?* (p. 51). The standard English translation is *Who is to blame?*. This seems a confusion with Chernishevskii’s *Shto delat?*.

the same entities. Sharper distinctions should have been made between “*Russia’s cultural opinion-formers*”—those who “have sought to define themselves and their status through control over the linear narratives, over the shaping and telling of time” (p. 11)—and the editor’s opinion, even if the point of the book was to illustrate the former. There is no denying that Rus’ and Russia as identical concepts appears several times in the book, and this conveys false, ideologically charged messages. The book manages to ignore (either through ignorance or intentionally: I leave the choice to the reader) the debate about the Kyivan heritage, which has been going on for at least thirty years (longer if we include Hrushevs’kyi). It just happens that this debate has recently introduced many new facts and ideas that would have allowed for the formulation of a much better picture of the cultural and historical situation in both Russian and Ruthenian lands. There is no reason to continue to use ambiguous or false formulations, given the research results of the last decades. The shortcomings of this book are particularly surprising since clear opinions about the necessity and desirability of considering Kyivan Rus’ and Muscovy as different entities (and to abandon the idea of continuity between Kyiv and Moscow) appear among authoritative Russian scholars (e.g., Dimitrii Bulanin and V.M. Zhivov). Indeed, Western scholars seem often to be more conservative and more faithful to traditional views and interpretations than some Russians. It is amazing how such an outstanding scholar as Simon Franklin, for whom I have the highest esteem, slips into such inconsistency and lack of scholarly precision. Unfortunately, the case of S. Franklin and his book is not unique. Quite the contrary, it is a frequent case among “specialists” of Medieval Rus’ian history, language, literature, culture. Just to cite one example: in Paris-Sorbonne a well-known scholar organizes seminars about “*Historiens et chroniqueurs en Russie*” (the reference is to Old Rus’) and “*Civilisation orale et culture écrite en Russie (sic!) ancienne.*” Books dealing with “*Russian Medieval*” culture and/or literature (from the eleventh century onward), which use the outmoded terminology and point of view, appear in all languages: German, French, English, and Italian.³ Formulations such as “*Medieval literature or culture of Russia*” appear in dozens of handbooks. Why does this happen?

³ I can begin by pointing out R. Picchio’s *Storia della civiltà letteraria russa* (Torino 1996). This is a handbook of high quality and great utility, but it perpetuates the idea of continuity between Kyiv and Moscow, as all other Western handbooks. Unfortunately, this book, as many others of that period, appeared exactly at a time when great transformations were taking place in scholarship and the socio-cultural sphere (i.e., the 1990s). Picchio’s book was prepared over a very long span of time (I wrote the parts about 16th c. Muscovy and Pre-romanticism at the beginning of the 1980s): hence many aspects of the book need revision. This is just one example among many! I do not want to “blame” scholars for having conceived and written books according to the standards of knowledge of another time: I just want to make clear that the problem of re-thinking and re-examining old problems—and of finding better formulations for cultural realities of the past should be an on-going priority for any scholar!

I do not think that in all cases this is a question of bad will, although the pre-eminence of Russian nineteenth- and twentieth-century points of view is still dominant among Western scholars. Perhaps it is because in Western languages it is very difficult to find substitutes for adjectives like “altrussisch,” “russe ancien,” “russo antico” (only English has a choice between “Old Russian” and “Old Rus’ian”).⁴ I am sure that linguistic habits often create simple automatic reflexes, which are hard to change. In my opinion, however, there are “deeper” roots for this unfortunate situation. It is exactly the specialist who often makes use of incorrect terminology and combines concepts that should be clearly defined and—sometimes—separated. This happens, at least, for two reasons. First, because specialists know that every definition and term is “conventional,” hence “we (the specialists) know” that “russe médiéval,” “alt-russisch,” “antico-russo,” “old Russian” are conventional formulations for the special culture of Kyiv and Novgorod, that Muscovy comes later and began to pretend to the Kyivan heritage in the late sixteenth–seventeenth century, that unity is provided by the Church Slavonic tradition, etc. Indeed, specialists “know,” and in the twentieth century they did not bother very much about what non-specialists thought: besides, until some twenty years ago, only a very tiny number of readers was interested in Medieval Rus’ian culture or Russian culture in particular; the interested people were primarily scholars and they ‘knew what they are speaking about.’ Hopefully, specialists explained their secret knowledge also to students in classes. The problem is that in the last two decades many more books have been written, the readership is wider and it ‘*does not know*’ the unstated conventions we use for writing and speaking. Authors have a great responsibility of communicating true information to a broader public. I believe that editors and authors should be very precise and very cautious when giving titles and using terminology. Moreover, they should not give publishers the opportunity to ‘play’ with words: *Rus’ is not Russia*, and this should be clear in every title and in every definition and formulation *throughout the whole book or through an entire article*, not only in an ambiguous ‘declaration of intentions’ somewhere at the beginning. Terminology is *very important*, and it should be clear that “Rus’ian” does not mean the same thing as “Russian,” for the interchangeability of the terms Rus’/Russia is not acceptable. Editors and authors should not allow titles and comments to be arranged by publishers in order to make a book more ‘attractive’ for the market. I do not agree with the idea that titles, being “marketing devices ... should not predetermine one’s view of the substance” (p.113). This is a question of ethics, not only a question of scholarship and scientific knowledge. In any case, there is no reason to use Russia instead of—or as

⁴ I will allow myself to refer to my own article on this issue: “Ruś, Ukraina, Ruthenia, Wielkie Księstwo Litewskie. Rzeczpospolita, Moskwa, Rosja, Europa środkowo-wschodnia: o wielowartowości i polifunkcjonalizmie kulturowym,” in: *Contributi italiani al XIII Congresso Internazionale degli Slavisti* (Ljubljana 15–21 agosto 2003), ed. by A. Alberti, M. Garzaniti, S. Garzonio, Pisa 2003, pp. 326–387.

a substitute for—Rus': the term "Russia" is certainly not fitting for old Kyivan Rus', nor for the complex of East Slavic (hybrid Church Slavonic) literature, language and culture. Even for Early Muscovy, "Russia" should be used cautiously.

A second reason why I think that the distinctness of Kyivan Rus' from Russia is often blurred, may be the following: philologists mainly dwell on Old Rus'ian (both Old Kyivan and/or Old Novgorodian), Old Muscovite, Old Serbian and Old Bulgarian texts. They are generally written in more or less hybrid Church Slavonic and present local features, but they are still uniform enough to be recognized as a form of *Slavia orthodoxa*, which had clearly supranational features from the tenth to the eighteenth century. For this domain of Slavic Philology it is clear that the regional differences are far less important than the unifying context. In this case, it is sometimes difficult to find good terms, beyond such generic formulations as (Old) Church Slavonic (language and literature), Slavo-Byzantine (culture/area), *Slavia orthodoxa*, *Slavia Cyrillo-Methodiana*, and other similar formulations. "*Old Russian*" apparently belongs to these types of terms: unfortunately it has, in reality, a very different meaning and is highly ambiguous. Specialists, mainly philologists, deal with Church Slavonic texts and culture: unity is a reality in this domain, and the Orthodox Church tradition is conservative in and of itself. Social, historic and cultural studies, on the other hand, give more and more evidence of deep differences existing in the many Slavic—and specifically East Slavic—areas. Specialists in these fields are often more inclined to accept new terminology and new points of view.

To be sure, even taking into account such considerations, terminology should be clear and geared to the reality one wishes to describe. I dare to ask, how useful is it for specialists in Church Slavonic language and literature—specialists who are basically philologists—to become involved in such general cultural overviews as appear in the book under discussion? In any case, if a philologist wishes to confront such large spaces as Rus' and Russia, and cover ten centuries of time, he/she should remember to be a philologist, which means: a specialist in "words," whose purpose is to give as precise a definition as the context demands. Such a specialist should remember this even more, when he approaches very broad, general, "cultural" and "identity" themes, which are "slippery" by definition and need to be treated very seriously and cautiously.

Despite Franklin's protestation (as recorded by Halperin), the book under discussion includes the whole time and space of Rus' and all of its regions, as if everything was "Russia." The editors, and in many cases also the contributing authors, fail to provide exact definitions and fail to use appropriate terminology. This often leads to a fusion of the views of *Russian cultural opinion-formers* with the wording and phrasing of the authors of the articles of the book. The reader frequently views and perceives the whole eastern Slavic space and the entire thousand years of time (with its history, culture and literature) as a Russian time-space continuum. Naturally, there is room for a "Russian narrative" of East Slavic

history and culture, in the sense that many aspects of the culture of the Eastern Slavic peoples have a common component. Old Rus' should not be considered the 'first phase' of Russian history and culture (this is my opinion), but it would be also incorrect to forget that a great part of the Church Slavonic literature became part of Muscovite literature, even as it remained part of the supranational *Slavia orthodoxa*. What is frequently forgotten, however, is that—besides the Church Slavonic tradition, which indeed had many common features—there were many other aspects of cultural life which show just how differentiated the East Slavic world was. Let us recall such examples as the social structure, juridical traditions (e.g., Magdeburg law and related legal practices), social or ethnic mind sets, "low" and vernacular literature (byliny, dumy, Novgorodian *gramoty*), political organization (e.g., the Novgorodian Republic), art and architecture, eschatological beliefs, ceremonial practices, such 'borderline' phenomena as "iurodstvo," superstitions and magic formulas, shamanic remnants, and others. These domains of culture have been investigated traditionally in separate branches of knowledge: only in the last decades have interdisciplinary studies begun in earnest.

Moreover, the complexity of the area (Eastern Slavdom) goes far beyond the "contest for the Kyivan heritage" or the question of when Old Kyivan literature "became" Russian literature. Indeed, the Russian identity can hardly ignore the impact in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of Ruthenian poets and doctrinal writers: they were part of a different multicultural reality which brought Western Baroque literature and logic categories to Moscow and St. Petersburg. Unfortunately, this whole part of Russian culture has been completely neglected in the book (and probably would not have fit, given the limited pages). The existence of this complicated cultural system—with its roots in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth—is crucial for understanding Russia and the evolution of Russian identity.

To conclude: I hope the comments made above hint at the difficulties scholars have at the present time. Research is evolving rapidly in many places; re-evaluation of facts and texts are taking place thanks to new methodologies and changing perspectives. This obliges scholars to be extremely cautious at each step of their own examination of East Slavic cultures, especially when vast spaces and time periods are involved. I am convinced that only very flexible systems and methodologies can illustrate the culture(s) and literature(s) of the East Slavic area, where until modern times (the eighteenth century or later), literary and cultural systems often overlapped. In the Ruthenian lands the self-perception of authors and communities was predominantly multiple: writers and people belonged to two or more communities at the same time, spoke and wrote in two or more languages, often had two or more "loyalties." There was a radical difference between Kyivan and Muscovite (and also Novgorodian) culture since the Middle Ages. Today scholars should not posit boundaries that did not exist in the past. However, they should not unite under a single term or description what was not in fact unitary. History of culture and literature of this whole area may be viewed from several

different points of view. Russian culture needs to be investigated and can be seen from its own point of view; the same is true for Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Belarusian or Polish. In any case, overlapping of self-consciousnesses, plural “loyalties” and allegiances, multiple belongings of literary or spiritual heritage(s) should be described and acknowledged.⁵ For these purposes, precision in terminology and methodological premises are indispensable.

⁵ An excellent model in many respects is Timothy Snyder’s *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). I would also suggest: S. Plokhy, *Unmaking Imperial Russia: Mykhailo Hrushevsky and the Writing of Ukrainian History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).