

# CLASSICAL STUDIES IN RUSSIA AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: A COLLECTIVE PORTRAIT IN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

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The principal intention of the present volume is to acquaint western colleagues with the scholarly activity of a ‘young generation’ of Russian classicists and ancient historians, i. e. those who entered classical studies during the 1990s and with whom the present as well as the future of Russian classics and ancient history is linked. The contributors to the volume have taken the liberty of reckoning themselves part of such a generation both on the basis of some objective grounds and by formal age qualification: by now, almost all of them are in their thirties or forties. As our experience shows, such an acquaintance is currently a matter of importance. For, despite an appreciable multiplication and extension of contacts between Russian and Western scholars during the last decades, the classical studies pursued in modern Russia are poorly integrated into international scholarship; their tendencies and principal results are, by all accounts, a *terra incognita* and at times even a kind of exotic topic for the international academic community. So in what follows we would like to illuminate, on the one hand, the general historical context in which the classical disciplines emerged and developed in Russia and the USSR (although there are already some special works on this topic), and on the other hand to provide a brief outline of current features and problems of the present-day situation (about which next to nothing has been published). In this we shall pay attention less to concrete persons and works than to trends, basic factors and processes of change in the evolution of classical studies in contemporary Russia.

Looking back, it is important to note some specific characteristics of the historical roots and development of Russian classical scholarship.

In the pre-revolutionary period, classical studies in Russia, from their very origin as an academic and university discipline in the mid-eighteenth century right up to the mid-nineteenth century, held a ‘student position’ relative to western – above all, German – scholarship. The study of ancient history, classical education and classicism as a whole evolved as one of the directions taken by – and at the same time as one of the foundations of – the Europeanization of Russia that began in the reign of Peter the Great. A factor of exceptional importance in the successful formation of Russian classical scholarship was the availability of ancient archaeological monuments in the North and North-West of the Black Sea region, which made it possible to use and examine rich ancient materials in their specific regional variety

without expending much money on expeditions abroad. This circumstance laid the foundations for the prompt and successful promotion not only of classical archaeology, but also of the scholarly fields of museum work, history of art, numismatics and epigraphy. From the mid-nineteenth century, many postgraduate students from Russian universities preparing to proceed to a professorship underwent their training at the most significant European academic centres (primarily in Germany), took courses under the direction of the most eminent specialists and subsequently promoted classical studies in Russia, and thus were well integrated into the international scholarly community. Thanks to direct government support, the personal efforts of particular scholars and teachers (initially from abroad and then from Russia itself) and the growing interest in classical antiquities among educated circles in Russian society,<sup>1</sup> by the end of nineteenth century Russian classical scholarship had not only overcome its 'student' stage, but met the highest international academic standards, reached its fullest flower and became a real foundation for all the humanities.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, in all fairness it must be noted that already after the reforms of the 1860s and 1870s the classical educational paradigm, and in the first place the official classicism inspired and propagated by the tsar's government, had begun to be regarded by progressive intellectuals as something obsolete and antiquated that was invoked solely to serve conservative purposes and the interests of the authorities.<sup>3</sup> The ironical attitude of society towards official classicism is strikingly exemplified by Anton Chekhov's story "A Person Who Keeps Himself in Cotton Wool", which portrays a teacher of Ancient Greek, Belikov, as a person absolutely isolated from real life, unable to understand anything in reality and afraid of everything. It is also noticeable that it was this period that saw the beginning of an informal division of scholarship into 'metropolitan' (in St. Petersburg and Moscow) and 'provincial' (all other towns, including even significant university cities), as well as into academician and university scholarship. At present we continue to reap the bitter fruits of this division, which only deepened in Soviet times. No polycentric system of universities as research centres took shape in Russia as it did in many Western countries.

After the Bolsheviks' coup in October 1917 and the subsequent establishment of Soviet power, the progress of Russian classical scholarship virtually came to a halt, like that of the humanities in general. Classical studies in Soviet Russia were

- 1 In pre-revolutionary Russia an educated section of society reached a quite high level of culture, thanks above all to widespread gymnasium education (there were classical gymnasia in all cities and many towns of the Russian Empire), which undoubtedly promoted strong public interest in classical history (one of many typical instances are housewives reading Plutarch).
- 2 Frolov, E.D. 2006, 436. On the pre-Soviet development of Russian classical scholarship see also Buzeskul, V.P. 1929–1931; Tunkina, I.V. 2002; Klein, L.S. 2007; Swoboda, K. 1959. On the cultural and historical context in which the classical heritage was assimilated in Russia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see especially Wes, M.A. 1992; Knabe, G.S. 2000.
- 3 Indeed, the gymnasium reform of 1871, which prescribed obligatory learning of two classical languages, was intended, as the vice-minister of education A.P. Nicolai acknowledged, "to contribute to sobering up the young people from modern free-thinking both religious and political" (Nicolai, A.P. 1899).

affected in full measure by the metamorphoses endured by Russian culture and society following the revolution. Many eminent scholars (Michael Rostovtzeff is the most famous instance) and ordinary specialists, including gymnasium teachers, went into exile; many perished in the years of the Civil War and Red or White terror, while those who survived in their native country were essentially deprived of any opportunity to continue their research and teaching activities. By the late 1920s, the majority of all scholarly approaches and schools, above all in the fields of classical philology, epigraphy and papyrology, had ceased to exist. Almost immediately after the Revolution and Civil War the targeted eradication of the traditional classical education began: gymnasia and faculties of history and philology were closed, most specialized periodicals and editions ceased (in pre-revolutionary times these had had a quite high international standing),<sup>4</sup> scholarly and educational societies were abolished and archaeological investigations curtailed. The contacts between Russian and foreign colleagues were reduced almost to zero, as were the previous opportunities for Russian scholars to publish the results of their research in Western journals; also, for a good while educational and scholarly journeys abroad became impossible for them. It followed from this, of course, that Russian classical scholarship lost the solid and impressive level of attainment that it had achieved before the Revolution. It is worth emphasizing that the classical disciplines and the humanistic education very largely based on them turned out to be almost entirely alien to the so-called ‘proletarian culture’ that was being vigorously implanted by the Bolsheviks’ Party and they were officially considered as at best useless ‘leftovers’ of the old regime and at worst as reactionary and politically suspect fields, with all the ensuing consequences. Like the humanities as a whole, classical scholarship was subject to massive ideological pressure. In studies of even the most distant past, confirmation of the so-called formation theory of Karl Marx was made the cornerstone of history. Ancient history did not evade this fate, having become a ‘test-site’ for Marxist political economy and the conception of class-struggle. It was invoked primarily to certify the existence of a particular slave-owning social and economic formation and to detect the regularities of its fall and replacement by the feudal system as a result of class-struggle, which was to be regarded as a decisive factor of historical development.

It is fair to record that many ancient historians, primarily those of the younger generations, deliberately chose Marxist methodology and ideas for their work, considering them a genuinely fruitful way to understand history and a direct route towards a new historical synthesis. Yet by the end of the 1920s all researchers, includ-

4 Among the periodicals issued until 1917 and dealing (entirely or partly) with classical studies the following should be mentioned: *Vizantijskij Vremennik* (Byzantine Journal), *Zhurnal Ministerstva Narodnogo Prosvetsheniya* (The Journal of the Ministry of People’s Education), *Hermes, Propylaiai, Filologicheskoye obozrenie* (Philological Review), *Filologicheskiye Zapiski* (Philological Proceedings), among others. As well as a lot of monographs and various collected volumes, the fundamental editions of inscriptions and iconographic monuments should be noted, such as B. Latyshev’s *Inscriptiones antiquae Orae Septentrionalis Ponti Euxini Graecae et Latinae*. Vol. I–II, IV. Petropoli, 1885–1890, 1901 (Vol. I 2: 1916); Rostovtzev, M. I. 1914.

ing most representatives of the old school, were required in an obligatory manner to acknowledge Marxist doctrine as the only true mode of social cognition and to follow rigorously the methodology of historical materialism in its vulgarized Stalinist form. Accordingly, all other conceptions and approaches were proclaimed without proof to be “unscientific” and connected to “bourgeois” ideology. The humanities, including ancient history, were turning into one of the fronts in an implacable ideological struggle. Not only was academic debate replaced by unfounded criticism of any non-Marxist theories and methods, but it became indispensable to unmask the so-called “ideological machinations and subversive activities” of bourgeois (i. e. all Western) scholars, who were announced to be “mercenaries of imperialism and fascism.” In the environment of the Communist Party’s total ideological supervision and censorship, especially in various ideological campaigns (such as the struggle against cosmopolitanism in the late 1940s and early 1950s), any deviation from existing canons of historiographic discourse, the tone of which was set by Stalin’s notorious “Short Course in the History of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks”, or even a well-disposed judgment of a work by a foreign scholar, or a mere reference to it, could have the most unpleasant consequences, right up to political charges and repressive measures. It is needless to add that any historical work was required to include references to the works of the founders of Marxism-Leninism, whose dicta were interpreted just like Holy Scripture and taken for gospel, becoming the basis not only of all conceptualization, but also of concrete historical research; in such research, the items and facts under investigation were adjusted to fit the schemes postulated in advance.<sup>5</sup> These trends and attitudes inevitably resulted in historical research that was both schematic and dogmatic, and in the narrowing of its subject-matter (studies of social and economic structures, material culture<sup>6</sup> and the forms of class-struggle gained absolute priority); they also left Soviet humanities closed and isolated and in direct confrontation with international scholarship. And although in the mid-1930s some attempts were made to overcome the most outrageous extremes in studying and teaching history,<sup>7</sup> many of the devel-

5 It is enough to recall the theory of “slave revolution”, which was constructed by some Soviet historians on the basis of one dictum by Stalin: in his speech at the first congress of collective farmers in 1933, he claimed that “the revolution of slaves liquidated slave-owners and abolished the slave-holding form of exploitation of working-people” (quoted from Mishulin, A. V. 1947, 133).

6 It is remarkable that from 1919 to 1934 research and educational work in the field of history, including ancient history, was fulfilled mainly within the Russian (State, since 1926) Academy of Material Culture. Philological and historical faculties in the universities, if not closed altogether, were reorganized into the faculties of social sciences.

7 In 1934 was issued the well-known resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR “On the Teaching of Civil History in the schools of the USSR”, by which systematic courses of history were restored in secondary schools, institutes of higher education and universities; also, former faculties of history were re-established and new ones opened where departments of world history were created; later, in Moscow and Leningrad universities the departments of classical philology were renewed. In 1936 the Institute of History, with a department of Ancient History, was established within the Academy of Sciences of the USSR; and in 1937 the specialized journal *Vestnik drevnej istorii* (Journal of Ancient History) began to be published.

opments and conditions described above continued to evolve to some degree in the post-Stalin period.

Nevertheless, classical scholarship managed to survive, primarily thanks to the self-denying labour of a few scholars of the older generation who, in spite of all obstacles, transferred their knowledge and experience to students, and from the mid-1950s onward, with some liberalization by the Soviet regime, it reclaimed much ground that had seemed lost. Little by little, the training needed to equip future classicists (historians and archaeologists as well as philologists) was restored, initially at Moscow and Leningrad universities and thereafter in many others. Archaeological work increased on a substantial scale and attained a new level; the concrete themes and subjects of historical studies became much more diverse, and in particular there was a certain levelling of Hellenic and Roman studies, the former having prevailed in pre-revolutionary and early Soviet times; new problems began to be raised for investigation and discussion, including issues in the political and cultural history of the ancient world; and important results were achieved in the study of ancient slavery, which were generally recognized in international scholarship.<sup>8</sup> A series of books by Soviet scholars was translated into European languages and became widely known among foreign specialists.<sup>9</sup>

During the period under investigation the classical disciplines, including ancient history, were nonetheless affected by the ideology to a lesser degree than other humanities and they became something of a niche in which, unlike other areas of history, it was possible to work more professionally, not just opportunistically. Under these circumstances, classical studies became an area that attracted people sincerely motivated by scholarly, rather than career interests, and who were genuinely committed to their profession. For that reason it may be permissible to note the high professional level of those historians who pursued classical studies in a serious way. It also deserves notice that during the 1960–1980s scholars of the humanities, including ancient historians, had a relatively high social standing and material well-being.

8 On Soviet works of this period see Utchenko, S.L. 1956; Raskolnikoff, M. 1975; Heinen, H. (ed.) 1980; Rubinsohn, W.Z., 1987.

9 E.g. Maschkin, N.A. 1954; Uttschenko, S.L. 1956a; Utchenko S.L. 1975; Marinovič, L.P. 1988; Zajcev, A. 1993. However, not all such experiences were successful; thus the German translation of V.P. Nevskaya's book (Nevskaya, V.P. 1953; Newskaja, V.P. 1955) received devastating but fair criticism by the prominent French epigraphist L. Robert (Robert, J., Robert, L. 1958, 270–276). Traditionally, Russian scholars have held a strong position in the archaeological and historical investigation of the Northern Black Sea region, and some of their work in this field has also been translated, for example Blawatskij, V., Kochelenko, G. 1966; Gaidukevič, V.F. 1971; Podossinow, A.W. 1987. Soviet scholars also successfully promoted the study of such themes as ancient slavery, a topic which at first had strictly ideological connotations, but with time it was investigated in a more academic manner. See the works published in European languages: Štaerman, E.M. 1964; Štaerman, E.M. 1969; Štaerman, E.M., Trofimova, M.K. 1975; Štaerman, E.M., Smirin, V.M., Belova, N.N., Kolosovskaja, Yu. K. 1987. Just after the disintegration of the USSR the translation of collected articles concerning Graeco-Roman slavery written by Soviet ancient historians was published in France: Mactoux, M.-M., Guny, E. 1995. For Soviet studies of this topic see in general Heinen, H. 2010.

Among the positive characteristics of historical studies in the later Soviet Union it is worth noting that there was good coordination and cooperation between scholars from Russia and the other Soviet Republics, in the first place Ukraine, Moldavia, Central Asia and Transcaucasia. These regions have rich ancient monuments which were rigorously investigated both by local specialists and by scholars from Moscow and Leningrad and the results of their work were accessible to the whole scholarly community. In the meantime, new centres of classical studies gradually formed and established themselves in provincial universities; for the most part they were created through the personal efforts of one or another prominent scholar, such as V.G. Borukhovich (1920–2007) in Nizhny Novgorod and Saratov, A.S. Shofman (1913–1993) in Kazan or V.I. Kadeev (born in 1927) in Kharkov.<sup>10</sup> Their scholarly and educational activity contributed both to the revival of old pre-revolutionary traditions and to the formation of new research directions and themes. However, in the USSR the mobility so typical of Western scholars was absent: as a rule, most Soviet scholars were employed all their life in the same place; leaving one place for another was mostly caused by some reversal of fortune and rarely led to an intensification of scholarly activity at the new place of employment or to the formation of a new school. In this respect the situation has changed little in present-day Russia. In addition, the division of scholarship into that of the university and that of the Academy, unusual in the West, had only increased in Soviet times. Owing to the established organizational structures university employees, working full out with their teaching load and administrative duties, usually do not have enough time for research work, whereas the staff of academic institutes are in a way cut off from direct contact with the wider circles of university scholars and especially with younger scholars and students; they often lack opportunities to share their experience and knowledge, a circumstance that is not favourable for the reproduction of new generations of scholars. This state of affairs remains largely intact at present, but the vital necessity of integration between Academy and university scholarship has been recognized and ways to resolve this problem are being sought and realized.<sup>11</sup>

Along with undoubtedly positive trends and many incontestable achievements by Russian classical scholarship during the last decades of the Soviet period, some negative factors that originated in the pre-war years continued to have an effect.

10 It is fair to note that in post-Soviet times such centres have emerged practically in a vacuum, in universities where previously there were no traditions of classical scholarship – the cases in point are Magnitogorsk State Pedagogical University, in which classical studies are guided by Professor M. G. Abramzon, one of the leading Russian specialists in Greek and Roman numismatics, and the Centre for Classical Studies at Yaroslavl Demidov State University, organized and guided by Professor V. V. Dementieva.

11 Thus since 2003 within the Institute of World History of the Russian Academy of Sciences a Centre of Integration between Academy and University Scholarship has been established. This Centre undertakes many efforts to coordinate the research projects and educational activities of scholars from universities and the Academy. Particularly, in 2006 it organized a series of lectures and seminars for university lecturers and then a round-table discussion on the problems of studying the ancient *polis*. A significant number of provincial university staff, as well as colleagues from Ukraine, took part in these projects.



Thus the isolation of Soviet scholarship continued, although not to the same extent; normal educational and other contacts with the West were lacking as before. Most such contacts became a privilege of a quite narrow circle of scholars, all but a very few from Moscow. For postgraduate students and young scholars, especially from the provinces, there were practically no opportunities for educational training and research stays in Western centres. As before, there were very few periodicals that addressed the classical disciplines,<sup>12</sup> while the academic level of many periodicals issued in provincial universities (at best annually) was often insufficient; scholarly associations and independent societies like those of pre-revolutionary Russia did not appear. Foreign literature and periodicals were easily accessible only in a few metropolitan libraries, and even there collections' development was far from satisfactory.

It should be said that research themes and scholarly approaches in many respects continued to be relatively narrow, at times even clichéd, either due to directions issued from the top of the academic administration, or because they had been developed spontaneously. Social, economic and class-struggle history in the spirit of historical materialism obviously prevailed, but in the study of ancient culture, philosophy and literature interesting works appeared increasingly and in fairly large numbers, greatly promoting and deepening our understanding of Graeco-Roman civilization.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, many research fields and methodological approaches – especially compared to their rapid rates of progress in the West – were very poorly represented in Soviet scholarship, including areas such as the study of ancient democracy, history of mentalities, of law and power, the history of women, many aspects of military history, prosopography, papyrology, and so on.

The radical and rapid changes that occurred in the USSR in the late 1980s and early 1990s have undoubtedly had a great impact on the humanities. Along with the end of the 'Iron Curtain', the downfall of the total ideological dominance of the Communist Party and the collapse of the Soviet Union, there have appeared, on the one hand, much more freedom and a wide range of choice, more openness and new options and opportunities in scholarly activity. But on the other hand the social and economic upheavals have entailed no small negative consequences for our field. Many of the cardinal foundations of the very *system* of Soviet scholarship have been demolished. The relative material well-being of the 1970s and 1980s has been left far behind. The inescapable, although not always well-thought out, reforms of the economic, social and political structures have hit hard at the interests of educational and academic institutions: most of them have become totally impecunious

12 In essence, in the Soviet Union there were only two serious and regular journals concerning ancient history and archaeology, both issued by the Academy of Sciences. They are *Vestnik drevnej istorii* (Journal of Ancient History) and *Sovetskaya arkheologiya* (Soviet Archaeology). No other journal of such a high level specially devoted to ancient history and classical philology has yet appeared.

13 Among them can be noted the works by prominent philosopher and historian of ancient philosophy Alexey F. Losev (1893–1988), philologists Aristid I. Dovatur (1897–1982), Mikhail L. Gasparov (1935–2005), Sergey S. Averintsev (1937–2004), the specialist in Roman history Georgij S. Knabe (1920–2011) and the well-known experts in Greek history and archaeology Tatjana V. Blavatskaya (1917–2007) and Yury V. Andreev (1937–1998).