Studying the History of Classical Scholarship in Soviet Russia

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INTRODUCTION

Classical education has been in a state of grave crisis in Russia since the end of the nineteenth century. The classical gymnasium as the only institution of general education opening the way to the university was abolished 15 years before the Soviets closed down all gymnasia. And yet, those who witnessed the gradual decline remembered the blooming of the Silver Age whose creators and consumers belonged to an era when the classical education reigned supreme. The idea of the approaching Slavic renaissance of antiquity (the utopias of Innokentij Annensky, Tadeusz Zieliński, and Vyacheslav Ivanov\(^1\)) did not take into account the fact that in the entire Russian Empire only a small number of university cities retained public classical gymnasia.

Classical philology in Russia's secondary schools was abolished immediately after the revolution and in 1921 admission

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to university classical departments was terminated. They were once again reopened in Moscow and Leningrad 12–14 years later; then, at the end of the nineteen-forties and at the beginning of the fifties there was a short-lived attempt to introduce Latin in senior schools and increase admissions to the classical departments of higher learning institutions. These three turning points were closely tied with politics. How it was understood by classical scholars will be discussed later.

The Soviet era witnessed forced the re-orientation of classicists into other professional spheres. By no means do I want to say this was good. However, thrown out of their social nests these people created the new and unexpected. Boris Kazansky, for example, temporarily joined the formalists; the owner of a classical gymnasium A. Popov authored several humane laws. A. Piotrovsky and S. Radlov pioneered the reconstruction of ancient plays; I. I. Tolstoy got engaged in folklore studies, and so on.

In the nineteen-twenties and thirties, numerous, often experimental or innovative translations of ancient authors were produced. Had M. Kuzmin not been pressed to earn his living as a translator, in all probability we would not have such an outstanding translation of Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*. These are the by-products of a situation when creative individuals are ejected into the sphere of intellectual service. This is how the eminent publishing house Academia came into being. In the conditions of persecutions and limitations, the discipline of Classics left its boundaries enriching itself and others.

**REVOLUTIONARY TRANSFORMATIONS TOWARD THE BEGINNING OF THE THIRTIES**

During the period following collectivization, the classical departments of the Leningrad Institute of History, Philosophy and Linguistics and the Moscow Institute of Philosophy, Literature and History, in 1932 and 1934 respectively, were resurrected. The unusual acceleration and frequency of the reorganizations of higher-learning institutions, along with all the concomitant innovations of the thirties, resulted in a
stable, and in many ways, traditional system of organization of scholarship and education, accompanied by the restoration of professorial ranks, degrees, and the like. During those hiatus years, however, irrevocable changes took place. Toward 1929, the graduates of classical gymnasia reached adulthood and could not aspire to enroll in the reopened classical departments. The professors were the same pre-revolutionary professors, but, with rare exceptions, the cultural gap between them and their audience guaranteed the non-reproduction of the teachers' value systems among their students. The return of classical education to the university occurred when a self-assured Soviet system reclaimed the old forms. But those forms no longer held the potential for creating a non-Soviet intelligentsia.

As for teaching Latin at schools, its restoration occurred in the ideologically gloomiest years after the military victory over Nazi Germany. With Stalin's death the teaching of Latin, such as it was, was blown away along with the separate school education and other decorative attributes of pre-revolutionary Russia.

Classical studies were being destroyed during the vanguard revolutionary period – while the elements of their restoration, limited as they were, belong to the period of the ideological crackdown. Two signposts of the Soviet style, after the collectivization and after the military victory, are accompanied by this sort of doll-house renaissance.

We are currently witnessing yet another renaissance. With the start of perestroika and its tendencies toward the restoration, classical education is once again on the rise and spreading. There are some classical gymnasia, as well as many schools, lyceae, and regular gymnasia where Latin is taught; furthermore, departments of classical philology appeared in Russian Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant educational institutions. The number of graduates from classical departments has increased as well.

I teach history of Russian Altertumswissenschaft in the twentieth century to students of classics and ancient history. This requires some foundation of self-awareness in these students, since the study of the profession takes place from inside the profession itself. Classical antiquity is studied all over the world and young classicists will by all means become acquainted with foreign literature in the field they research, but I believe that for them to become scholars and teachers they must enter into the ownership of their rights as heirs in relation to their predecessors. Thus the course attempts to resolve an antinomy familiar to us from the relationship between Plato and Aristotle – namely, how to regard the predecessors and teachers? How to reconcile the duty of respect appropriate for heirs and students towards previous generations, with the duty of impartial criticism and openness to the new? Besides, if it is disgraceful to criticize the dead, it is sometimes perilous to criticize the living.

THE DIFFICULTIES

Among the difficulties in teaching such course, for example, is the absence of national bibliography of antiquity, which has been lacking in Russia for many decades. There is much material covering particular problems but Eduard Frolov's Essays about the History of Russian Altertumswissenschaft, the only book that attempts a generalization of the subject, triggered not gratitude for the attempt but severe criticism. The reviewers complained that the book was too large for a collection of essays but insufficient to be considered history; that Frolov talks about historians rather than philologists and art historians; that he deals with St. Petersburg and not Moscow, not to mention other cities; that it is about Hellenists and not Latinists or historians of Rome. Frolov is a historian, a Hellenist and St. Petersburg native, and it is natural that he compiled and systematized

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3 See the website of the Russian University for the Humanities, The Sector of Classical Ancient Studies, en.ivka.rsuh.ru.

whatever he could in the areas he knows best. It is also natural that the nineteenth-century history prevails in his book. The main milestones after 1917 and the contemporary state of affairs take up only thirty pages in this large volume, whereas the appendix contains four detailed portraits of his teachers. Such is the state of the present-day scholarship. The twentieth century, in general, remained beyond either theoretical or historic grasp.

THE SUBJECT OF ALTERTUMSWISSENSCHAFT

Another difficulty is the interdisciplinary character of classical philology. The new term “antikovedenie” (“study of antiquities,” “classical studies”), which entered the Russian language, strives to yield the same meaning as the German Altertumswissenschaft. As Biblical studies or geography, our discipline is established by the unique value of its object rather than by a subject matter. In our period of increased specialization this archaic complexity of Altertumswissenschaft encounters, skirting a spiral of history, the new interdisciplinarity. And this is why the circle of the disciplines studied, in addition to philology, includes such areas as archaeology, linguistics, history of religions, history of art, and an ocean of philosophical, political, and legal studies, as well as studies dealing with daily life, history of theatre, music, and classical education. It is clear that to take into account all the branches of Altertumswissenschaft is beyond an individual endeavour – whereas the collective studies lack a conceptual backbone. The content of Altertumswissenschaft does not have clear natural boundaries, as for instance the planet or the Bible. Instead, it is determined by the abstract value-coloured construct, “ancient culture,” the borders of which are blurred and continually debated.

ALTERTUMSWISSENSCHAFT AND CLASSICAL EDUCATION

Another problem is that unlike other sciences, the history of Altertumswissenschaft is closely associated with the history of secondary classical education. These two are communicating
vessels. The abolition or even a deterioration of secondary classical education is bound, in the medium-term perspective, to affect the domain of classical antiquities. A historian of contemporary physics can ignore the curriculum of physics, a historian of contemporary biology can ignore school biology; a historian of *Altrtumswissenschaft* or classical philology cannot do the same. The termination of classical education in schools will quickly put the entire discipline at the university at risk. The short disruption in university classical education, mentioned above, resulted in a situation where student years were spent on acquiring basic knowledge at the gymnasium level. Students were preparing for routine teaching of ancient languages for lawyers, doctors, teachers, and philologists from different fields. Serious scholarly work was outside the pale of consideration: the old guard strove to drag a frail vessel of knowledge of ancient antiquity across those wilderness years by hook or by crook. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, scholarly research was almost immediately reoriented toward western scholarship. A former predilection for Germany, which prevailed even after the Revolution, as long as the activity of those with pre-revolutionary education and their students persisted, was replaced by a larger diversity with the prevalence of orientation toward the grant-givers – above all, the United States.

**DESCRIPTION FROM INSIDE THE SYSTEM: METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS**

It goes without saying that the problems of *Altrtumswissenschaft* have a lot in common with the problems of any other discipline. To study history of science one has to be a historian of a corresponding period and, at the same time, a specialist in the given discipline. This is a rarity. That is why good scholarship and good historians of science are so few. But classical

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philology and studies of antiquity have their own peculiarities and, in addition, their own qualities of the “model.” What is true for other histories of science transpires very vividly in our case, at least in Russia.

The history of Altertumswissenschaft is produced from within a profession. The historian of any discipline, not only ours, encounters what one could call a hagiographic paradigm. I tend to believe that the community of classicists has a myth about itself, a myth which goes something like this: after the Silver Age comes the period of black collapse, the rupture – in other words, the Bolsheviks came and destroyed everything. Among the community of classicists, only the initial abolition of secondary classical education and the closing down of university departments are thought through. In the professional collective self-consciousness, the deadness and conventionalism of public gymnasia were relegated into oblivion whereas the pre-revolutionary world of classical studies was idealized.

And here is a question: how does the profession perceive the ten- or twelve-year long interruption in the university teaching? As a huge period of void, the collapse that had lasted for twenty years, as M. Gasparov, known for his accuracy, said in one of his interviews. The changes in the fate of classical scholarship and education are not interpreted by scholars of antiquity. One’s own being is perceived as being under permanent threat from the authorities. Nobody denies this fact. This simplified picture, however, cannot explain the episode of the introduction of Latin at school during the late Stalinist period. A very natural stand of self-defence does not facilitate the objective study of the discipline and education from the inside.

THE HAGIOGRAPHIC PARADIGM

The myths our academic community creates and narrates about itself can be viewed as a direct realization of what I call the “hagiographic paradigm.” Biographies of scholars – unlike the biographies of poets and artists – are often directly modelled on hagiographies. It is considered almost a faux pas to write about scholars as complex and sometimes ambiguous characters,
although almost every great scholar is bound to be complex and ambiguous. This “hagiographic canon” has deep historical roots, since nineteenth-century scholars have, to a certain extent, inherited the image of medieval scholars, who were almost exclusively monks, hence the popular image of severe austerity.

The rise of this “hagiographic canon” in the history of scholarship might also be due to the fact that much of the history of science or scholarship is written not out of interest for the history of ideas per se, but for – shall we say – ritual purposes, namely special occasions like deaths or anniversaries. I do not in any way want to discredit such laudatory writings; the desire to praise one’s teacher or colleague is understandable. The problem with such “ritualistic texts” is that as a rule there is no place in them not only for criticism but for analysis or comparisons either.

Despite the presence of factual data in scholars’ biographies, written by their students in a laudatory genre, or even by their children or widows, one cannot distinguish between a person of modest achievements and a serious scholar; the exceptions to this hagiographic paradigm are few and far between. Historiographical monographs or dissertations devoted to individual Russian classicists are usually written by provincial scholars who in Soviet times did not have – and sometimes still do not have – access to scholarly literature or sources to engage in the study of antiquity. Generalizing is not characteristic for their writings. When dealing with family history, namely accounts written or preserved by children and other relatives, excellent though such accounts may be, one can see clearly that impartial history cannot be written “from the inside” of a circle of one’s close friends or family or even colleagues.

**THE PROBLEM OF LOYALTY**

The gap that inevitably exists between reality and the written or even oral hagiographic canon described above often produces a kind of oral tradition consisting mostly of stories, gossip, jokes, and biographical anecdotes, sometimes leading to or culminating in a sort of quiet revision of one’s scholarly reputation. Those
two traditions, the written and the oral, may live in the same person without intersecting. Private details or gossip will never be mentioned in public or committed to paper. One may argue that this is the difference between public reputation and private hearsay, and that this is natural. But it must be remembered that what we are talking about is not gossip of the usual kind. The scholarly community has a number of features that allow it to exist as an entity, the absence of any formal ties notwithstanding. One such feature is creating, establishing, and maintaining the professional reputation of its members. Once created, this reputation must remain unchanged and unquestioned. This naturally leads to a certain double standard, to a dual ethical code, which may seem hypocritical, at least to a naïve outside observer, but which should be regarded as a special kind of professional ethics.

**Martyrdom as Paradigm**

**And Self-Image as a Victim**

A special case of the hagiographic paradigm is that of a martyr. This archetype is especially dangerous since younger generations of scholars tend to model themselves after their teachers; and it is in a sense much easier for an individual and even for a whole community to model oneself after a martyr than after a hero and his great achievements. For instance in the Gorbachev-era and in the early post-Soviet era most publications on the history of science and scholarship were written from the perspective of victims of the then falling regime. Of course, the history of Russian science during the Soviet era is the history of martyrs. But the roles in this history are not easily defined since victims and executioners switched places every now and then. However, those who actually were the victims tend to lack self-awareness and are often uncritical towards themselves and their environment. Almost all classicists, by a kind of herd instinct, tend to be at least a little defensive and hostile towards the outside world, which they consider brutish and ignorant. This kind of defensiveness may actually be healthy, since the classics and classical scholarship are the very foundation of European and
Russian civilization, but at the same time it may also prove destructive, since it tends to undermine what one could call the ‘knowledge about knowledge,” out of which Greek philosophy and thus Greek rationality in general was born.⁶

ALTERNATIVE IMAGES OF SCHOLARSHIP
AND THE CULT OF AKRIBEIA

In classics, as well as in other areas of scholarship, one sees different and often competing images and models. While one such image can be described as “knowledge of reliable facts,” another is basically the notion that the classics are not a stiff and fully-formed mass, but an infinite source for the self-renewal of European culture. As T. S. Eliot describes it,⁷ tradition is not about walking in your predecessors’ footprints but rather about knowing where they had trodden. Thus science is not about accumulating and storing knowledge, but rather about asking new and unasked questions and proposing new and different explanatory models. Those two approaches to science have always had a rather painful, conflicted, and occasionally paradoxical relationship. During the Soviet era this relationship had become especially strained. Since classical scholarship always tended towards conservatism and positivism, these became highly charged ideologically and emotionally in Soviet society; classical scholars often sought to escape ideological pressure by immersing themselves in small empirical facts. For instance, after a devastating review in the country’s main newspaper Izvestia, Olga M. Freidenberg, the classical scholar and author of The Poetics of Plot and Genre,⁸ became the subject of intense scrutiny by ideological authorities. People were assigned to attend and ‘check out” her lectures on folklore theory. Every time those

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⁶ For a different story, one about a survival, see Marinus A. Wes, Michael Rostovtzeff, Historian in Exile: Russian Roots in an American Context, Historia Einzelschriften 65 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1990).


⁸ Her PhD dissertation was defended in 1935, published in 1936 and three weeks later confiscated by the authorities.
“minders” entered the room, she would stop mid-sentence and start talking about ancient Greek pottery, enumerating different kinds of vessels with certain kinds of handles (or without any handles at all), until the exhausted party-official would finally fall asleep or leave the room, fully convinced that classical philology is nothing more than an old and dusty crypt filled with useless rubbish.

The legend has it that Sergei Ivanovich Radzig even dared to correct mistakes in Stalin’s *Short Course*, insisting that the etymology of the word “dialectics” suggested by the *Course* was wrong, because the verb *dialego* does not exist in ancient Greek; there is only *dialegomai*. Here was a classicist desperately holding onto small factual verities of no importance to the authorities; there, in the realm of minute details, was the last line of his defence. It is perhaps characteristic that there were relatively few Party-members among Moscow and Leningrad classicists. European colleagues may notice a parallel with classical scholarship during the Nazi era.

It seems that ideological pressure is especially dangerous and destructive for those scholars who produce complex theories about human culture in general and fail to focus on a few Greek words or on a single textual emendation. Since they naturally have a taste for big ideas they tend to be easily “seduced” and carried away by new intellectual currents – decadence, Nietzscheism, Marxism, or (especially in the Soviet Union) the teaching of Nikolai Marr.

But such influential scholars, well-known outside of their own small scholarly community, are actually quite rare, and none of them is quite like the other. However, none of them could find refuge in the temple of fact-worship. Ideology penetrated their work, more actively poisoning the subterranean waters of their creative imagination. Thus both Piotrovsky – willingly – and Losev – under tremendous pressure – succumbed to Marxism. In the twenties, Olga Freidenberg was greatly influenced by Marr, who himself at that time tried very hard to coincide with Marxism.
One must not think, however, that those modest grammarians and lexicographers, who seem to live in a world of reliable facts and data, are immune to ideological influence. There is a problem here as well. Akribeia, signifying utter scholarly precision, while performing the role of special protection from the ideological intrusion, acquired the meaning not so much of the instrument, or means, but that of the goal; it was charged with the ideological significations that were not intrinsic to it – precisely for the purposes of protection from ideology.

A similar tendency is clearly visible in other areas of research during the sixties and the seventies – for example, structural linguistics, semiotics, and the application of mathematical methods to the humanities. The “pure science” brought with it its own peculiar ideology. Wishing to escape Marxism at all costs, Soviet classicists developed a profound distrust towards broad ideas and meaningful generalizations. They did so in the name of “exact descriptive factual science” and passed on their distrust to their students. One prominent classicist of the late Soviet era once said that all the major ideas and principles of classical scholarship were formulated by Schleiermacher, and all we can do now is continue developing them. Another one wrote a learned 800-page book on one of Aristotle’s most important philosophical terms without even once stating his own opinion on the subject.

Slow reading is in itself an excellent tool, but reading Plato’s Laws with mostly the same audience for twenty years is not scholarship but “life-building” (zhiznestroitelnstvo). Some teachers take pride in the fact that by the end of the semester, they only managed to read a few hundred lines of Euripides. But this may actually mean that while focusing on minute details they were unable to grasp the meaning of the work as a whole and even of that single passage. After all, Euripides wrote tragedies – not didactic material. What we see here is the ideal of scholarly precision and of fact-worship overshadowing the much more vital concept of sense and meaning; striving for precision may actually at some point become dangerous to scholarship.
In addition, many classicists like to think of themselves as being part of a very small elite squad on a mission to preserve and save the most fundamental values of European culture. This concept has produced a rather strange self-identity and concept of self among classicists. Not only do they want their elite status; they also want classical education to serve as paradigm and example to any other kind of education. But if classical education is to be widespread, it cannot at the same time keep its elite status. School teachers cannot afford elitism. The classics community has found a rather paradoxical way of dealing with this dilemma. Students are taught their Greek and Latin – but virtually no effort is made to engage them in classical scholarship. They are thus both educated and squandered by the academic community.

ON CLASSICS AND IDEOLOGY

As mentioned earlier, the teaching of Greek and Latin became much more widespread at the beginning of perestroika than it was before. This happened especially in the context of theological studies. Obviously, ancient languages and other classical disciplines must be studied in seminaries and theological colleges simply due to the fact that without them one cannot read the Gospels or patristic literature. But why should one study them in a secular context? Actually, in post-Soviet Russia, there is currently no clear consensus on that matter. One can even encounter the claim that classical education produces "model-citizens," conservative and loyal to the state, and not some kind of erratic geniuses. Which makes one wonder – first, why should anybody be afraid of erratic geniuses, since they are so rare, and then, why should classics teach us how to be loyal citizens, and not just citizens – sometimes loyal, sometimes not.

Alexander I. Zaicev, an excellent classical scholar, once gave a talk in Moscow on the tasks and goals of classical education. Strangely enough he kept saying "our young men," although his audience was about 88 percent female. I even asked him, rather

9 On Zaicev see Olga Budaragina's paper in this volume.
tactlessly I admit, whether classical education was at all useful to women. What we see here is actually a vague dream about Russia’s obsolete monarchy (with the Russian Orthodox Church being an important part of it), with elite boarding schools or gymnasia for boys. Which means that members of the educated class do not want to see themselves merely as “intelligentsia,” they want to be something more than that – namely, teachers and educators to the children of the new upper classes. That is how an attempt to revive the role of the educated class as court teachers, educators for the “heirs” of ruling estate, rather than “intelligentsia” as protector of “people,” occurred. But the monarchy is long gone, and the Orthodox Church as a social institution lost more than it gained from its rather close alliance with the state. If the educated class wants to be close to the new ruling class, one may wonder if they are actually worth anything in spite of all their education. The same goes for loyal citizens. Who, pray tell, should they be loyal to? There is no space to delve into the nineteenth century here, but I am fairly certain that ancient history and classical scholarship had never been “ideologically neutral” in Russia. On the contrary, both disciplines and the teaching of classics in particular, since they first appeared during the time of Peter the Great, have always been riddled with ideology.¹⁰ Not to mention that almost every ideological camp – revolutionaries, conservatives, republicans, monarchists, westernizers and their opponents – liked to use ancient history and its famous figures as a sort of polemical weapon.

To sum it up, the difficulties and problems of the study of the antiquities in the twentieth century are defined by the state of our archives, bibliographies, and sources. The absence of competent historians of science, the inevitable inclusion of many disciplines, and problems of secondary education further add to the difficulty. Of importance is also the fact that the classical education is coloured by ideology and values. And then

there is the problem of describing one's profession from within, the hagiographic paradigm, and the creation of the image of the academic community by way of preservation of scholarly reputations. Finally, during the Soviet period, the ideological pressure and the predominant idea of positive knowledge acting as a firewall against it, resulted in the self-contained cult of *akribeia*, which stands in the way of innovation and new ideas.\footnote{For further perspective, see Alexander V. Makhlayuk and Oleg L. Gabelko, "Classical Studies in Russia at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century: A Collective Portrait in Contemporary Context," in Andreas Mehl, Alexander Makhlayuk, and Oleg Gabelko (eds.), *Ruthenia Classica Aetatis Novae: A Collection of Works by Russian Scholars in Ancient Greek and Roman History* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2013), 13-30.}
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