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Russian National Myth in Transition.
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University of Tartu
Department of Slavonic Languages and Literatures
Department of Russian Literature

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Russian National Myth in Transition

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INTRODUCTION FROM THE EDITOR

LJUBOV KISSELJOVA

The reader keeps in the hands a collective monograph which was compiled by the authors living in different countries (Estonia, Finland, Russia, Ukraine, Germany, and Canada), forming a united research community guided by the traditions of the Tartu Lotman School. The topics, touched upon in the book, were worked at during several years and discussed at scientific meetings in different cities, in particular, in the framework of the Helsinki-Tartu seminar, held in Tartu on 28–30 June 2013. The seminar was the 14th in the series of mutual seminars of the Chairs of Russian Literature of the Universities of Helsinki and Tartu. In 1987, when the tradition of holding seminars was started, Pekka Pesonen, Ben Hellman, Yuri Lotman, Zara Mints and Sergei Isakov were at the beginning. As a result the research papers were published in the series “*Studia Russica Helsingiensia et Tartuensia*” (the first issue was printed in Helsinki in 1989). This is why the present monograph is printed in this series.

Although the seminars have always united the literature researchers first of all, historians, culturologists, semiotics and folklore specialists and others have participated in them and the topics and problems studied and discussed had always had an interdisciplinary character. In last 10–15 years the choice of problems was connected with the most acute current issues exciting the world’s humanitarian community: mythologizing and demythologizing of history, mythologizing of cultural space, etc. however devoting attention to the study of the role of literature in these processes. The collection of articles made on the basis of the materials of the 13th Helsinki-Tartu seminar is titled “Politics of Literature — Politics of Power”¹. The collective monograph “Russian National Myth in Transition” can be considered the direct continuation of the central idea of the previous collection: literature, including fiction, is forming the discourse and the narratives — as well as in power and opposition.

The current collective monograph explains on the basis of the different materials of Russian culture, beginning from the Late Middle Ages and finishing with the Soviet epoch, the notion of national myth in its development. The

¹ Политика литературы — поэтика власти: Сб. статей: *Studia Russica Helsingiensia et Tartuensia XIII* / Под ред. Геннадия Обатнина, Бена Хеллмана и Томи Хуттунена. М., 2014.

main part of the study is devoted to the Imperial period — the epoch when in fact the notion of nation arises². Although the understanding of “oneself” / “about oneself” and about “the other” / “the alien” is formed during several centuries, preparing the ground for the appearance and development of both the notion of nation and the national myth, having a long time ago consolidated in the cultural consciousness in the form of characteristic national-historical categories, stereotypes, prejudices, etc.

The national myth — it is an ideological construct which is created both in the national culture as well as outside its borders (views about Russia and Russians inside and outside the country — in the interrelation of these views). It would be more exact to speak not about the myth but the myths as there is no single construct describing social-political and cultural reality, no single narrative in each given historical period and even the ideological camp. The term “national myth” (in the singular) is used as a general notion, fixing the presence of constructs connected with the concept of nationality. Beside that it is a virtual and “above the author” construct which has not been fixed by anybody and not in any time and it is not accessible for the fixation by one author in one text.

In the imperial epoch the situation with the birth of national myth becomes more complicated because of the obvious contradiction between the status of Empire as a multinational and multi-confessional state and the necessity to create the ideology which could unite its different parts into one political body — the nation, in the Herder and post-Herder language. A. Zorin, A. Miller, R. S. Wortman³ vividly demonstrated how the Russian power tried to cope with this contradiction⁴.

² As it is known, national identity is one of the latest categories which appeared but one of the most powerful identification categories. Here we rely on the classical work: *Anderson, Benedict*. Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. London; New York, 2006.

³ См.: *Зорин А. Л.* Кормя двуглавого орла ... Литература и государственная идеология в России в последней трети XVIII – первой трети XIX века. М., 2001; *Miller, A.* The Romanov Empire and Nationalism. Essays in the Methodology of Historical Research. Budapest; New York, 2008; *Wortman, R. S.* Scenarios of power: myth and ceremony in Russian monarchy. Princeton University Press, 1995–2000. Vol. 1–2.

⁴ See also the contribution of the Tartu researchers to the constructing both the imperial and national ideologies in the collective monograph “Ideological Geography of the Russian Empire: Space, Borders, Inhabitants” by M. Borovikova, I. Bulkina, A. Vdovin, R. Voitekhovich, T. Guzairov, D. Ivanov, L. Kisseljova, R. Leibov, I. Rudik, T. Stepanischeva, E. Fomina, A. Ospovat (“Идеологическая география” Российской империи: пространство, границы, обитатели. Коллективная монография. Тарту, 2012. http://www.ruthenia.ru/territoria_et_populi/ideogeograf.html).

The present study continues this trend and at the same time it is in the field of studying historical semantics⁵. Analyzing the mechanisms of construction national ideology, the authors especially stressed the participation of literature and art in the nation building: the role of the press, theatre, writers and their works in their dependence upon historical matters and political conjuncture. But, however, in the formation of the national canon (including the national myth) not only writers and memoir-writers of the different level and “rank”, not only the press participate but there are also other nonfictional genres — such as school textbooks, readers, books for mass reading, etc. As it is demonstrated in the present study, their role should not be underestimated. The use of poetic means (and wider — artistic language in general) is not less important in building up the ideological discourse.

In the framework of Russian culture the figure of a writer (artist) was unflinchingly given a special role which was expressed in the formula “The poet in Russia is more than the poet”. In the present book this idea is analyzed by A. Nemzer in connection with the creative work of D. Samoilov.

Although raising the figure of a poet to the first ranks of nation building was made by German romanticism, the idea was warmly supported in Russia. All the Russian leading writers created their own, a more individual version of the national myth (L. Pild describes such a model using the example of Leskov) which then was repeated, very often in the transformed form, in the mass consciousness. It was also distorted when used by power structures in conjuncture aims. This way M. Kucherskaya opens up the process of “privatizing” Leskov’s creative work by Soviet ideologues. They interpreted him as a “Russian” and anti-German writer. The Russian classical author, who was forgotten and unnecessary to the proletarian state, appeared to be useful in building up the Soviet patriotic discourse in the 1940s.

As it is shown in the monograph, in constructing the Russian national myth, the same means which characterize the whole European tradition in the 18th – 20th centuries, are used:

- mythologizing of historical events and the search for national heroes who would meet the image of national character;
- the construction of the national identity (“Russianness”; “the Russian idea”);
- self-presentation, different from stereotypical images of Russians created in other cultures;

⁵ See the generalizing book: “Понятия о России”: К исторической семантике имперского периода. М., 2012. Т. 1–2.

- the formation of national characterology (including the comparison and the opposing of the Russian character with the images of other nations, the neighboring nations incl.)

This list could be made longer but, however, it makes sense to pay attention to some particular subjects touched upon in the present book.

The national stereotypes and political metaphors connected with them are discussed by R. Voitekhovich using the example of the myth about the Russian frost. He analyzes the European understanding of Russia as a Northern country which was formed by European travelers beginning already at least from the 15th century.

Cultural mechanisms of autocratic power are analyzed by J. Pogosjan and K. Ospovat. Using the example of the activities of the Baroque woodcarver Ivan Zarudny, J. Pogosjan describes the intervention of imperial power in such spheres as icon-painting and the construction of the iconostases, their use as an instrument of building of imperial ideology. K. Ospovat touches upon the problem of theatricality of power and describes the similarity between the theatrical effects of the tragedy and the cultural mechanisms of autocratic power. The ruler's charisma and its recognition by the subjects rely on the quasi-theatrical models of fulfilling political roles. Such understanding of power was reflected in the theatrical performances at the ruler's court where in the imaginary plots the complicated interrelations between monarchy and subjects were explained.

The military discourse is one of the cultural topics of the present monograph. A. Bodrova, I. Bulkina, L. Kisseljova, T. Stepanischeva have written about the mechanisms of the construction of the narrative about the war. The first two authors deal with the war of Russia with Sweden in the years 1808–1809, and the participation of Russian literature in the construction of the narrative of the Finnish war. A. Bodrova stresses the simultaneous ideological shaping of the campaign in the Russian printed materials, the acceptance of the war by its participants and their younger contemporaries. Then she looks at the reflection of these images and ideological constructs in the poem “Eda” by E. Baratynsky. The same line is continued by I. Bulkina who analyzes Baratynsky's poem and its reflections in the Ukrainian literature (the poems “Katerina” by T. Shevchenko and “Serdeshna Oksana” by G. Kvitka-Osnovyanenko). As the authors show, in “Eda” the story of the love of the Russian hussar and the Finnish girl develops in the framework of the “civilized narrative” but Baratynsky looks at the “colonial” plot in a complicated manner. Finns are considered a cultured European nation; they are associated with the populations

of German provinces that principally make them different from “wild Finns” and archaic sorcerers presented in the pre-romantic and romantic literature.

The imperial narrative, used by the Russian power in the beginning of the 20th century, is analyzed by T. Guzairov and it is an interesting “continuation” of this plot. The construction of the image of the enemy, the rhetoric of “national offence” and the policy of the protection of the title nation, on the one hand, vividly demonstrated the national myth of Finns to the metropolis and, on the other hand, allowed to legitimize the limitation of the constitutional rights of the Great Duchy of Finland in 1910.

L. Kisseljova deals with some basic constituents of the Russian national myth using the example of the Crimean War in the years 1853–1856. As the author shows the Russian military discourse unfailingly included the creation of heroes and “victorious” interpretation of events, the description of humaneness and scarifying of the Russian military as the basis of the national character. The model of the description of the lost war is in a paradoxical way adopting stories about the victorious Patriotic War of 1812 which has become the model of the narrative for any war in which Russia has participated not depending on the results of the war. The material for the analysis consisted of school textbooks, cheap popular prints and books for people’s reading in the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Together with the Russian sources the Estonian proto-newspaper “Tallinna koddaniku ramat omma söbbradele male” (1854–1857) by F. N. Russow has been analyzed.

When L. Kisseljova analyzed the construction of the myth about the Crimean War for “inner” use (the formation of national memory), T. Stepanischeva, using the example of the collection of P. Viazemsky’s articles “Lettres d’un vétéran russe de l’année 1812 sur la question d’Orient” writes about the construction of the analogous myth “for export”. As the author shows, Viazemsky refutes the opinions of the European press about Russia and provides Russians with the providential mission — uniting the West and the East. With this purpose he creates in “Letters...” a fully imperial myth about the united nation, loyalty to the throne and the church.

A. Vdovin also writes about the epoch of the Crimean War. He studies the ideological constructs of national identity (Russianness) which were offered by A. Maikov, I. Goncharov and A. Pisemsky. The author deals with the possibilities of the denial of the European discourse about Russia’s barbarism by writers. Maikov confirms that the peoples of the Russian Empire have already been consolidated by Russians into one united nation. Goncharov in general supposes that it is necessary not simply to “civilize” but assimilate non-Russians, but, however, the reality described by him refutes his thesis: Russians will be-

come influenced by Yakuts and not the other way round. In general Pisemsky had doubts about the success of the civilizing mission of the Empire in the outlying districts of the country but he blamed the non-Russians in it that they were unable to become cultured.

B. Hellman brought forward the English source of the “Russian fairy tale” by L. Tolstoy “Three bears” — “Goldilocks and the Three Bears”. The Russification of the English original, becoming stronger in the Soviet years in the illustrations of Yu. Vasnetsov and V. Lebedev, allows to read the fairy tale as a part of the national discourse (the bear — the metaphor of Russia).

One of the constituent parts of “Russianness” — pity — is studied by M. Borovikova using the creative work of Tsvetaeva as an example and T. Huttunen analyzes “Russianness” in the declarations of Russian imaginalists in the 1920s.

K. Polivanov has analyzed the Jewish topic in the novel “Doctor Zhivago” by B. Pasternak which was written in the years of the Soviet anti-Semitic campaign. The author analyzes the function of an episode in the novel in which the soldiers during World War I humiliate Jews. Through the words of the hero Pasternak expresses his idea of the necessity to give up the notion of nation in the Christian world.

R. Leibov showed the mechanism of the renewal of the national literary canon — how the important features of the lyrical hymn by V. Zhukovsky in the epoch of 1812 survived in the popular Soviet song of 1942.

The general topic of the book allowed the authors to touch upon a whole list of important philological issues, in particular the peculiarities of the poetic texts, the laws of referring to documentary sources and the ways of the incarnation of the author’s historiosophy, intertextual relationships and their pragmatics, the interrelation of the text and non-textual reality (historical, social, political and biographical contexts), etc.

The present book was created in the framework of several research projects of the Chair of Russian Literature at the University of Tartu, in particular the topic of target financing SF0180046s09. The book is the introduction to the new project “Ideology of Translation and Translation of Ideology: Mechanisms of Cultural Dynamics under the Russian Empire and Soviet Power in Estonia in the 19th – 20th Centuries” which will also be implemented in the close mutual activities of the authors who participate in the present monograph and the other colleagues.