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Thomas Nemeth, *Kant in Imperial Russia*

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Written by an eminent and prolific specialist in Russian philosophy, this new book may be considered the definitive, comprehensive and authoritative overview of the *Kantrezeption* in pre-Soviet Russia in the English language. The book proceeds chronologically, from Kant's days up to the Bolshevik Revolution, examining well-known and lesser known Russian philosophers and thinkers as well as figures of other nationalities who contributed to the dissemination of Kant's ideas in Russia. After the beginning of the Seven Years War, when Königsberg was under Russian occupation (1758–63), Kant was literally living within the Russian Empire. From this ensues a discussion of Kant's relationship with occupying military units stationed in his hometown as well as with some Russian intellectuals, among whom was Nikolai Karamzin, who paid Kant a visit during his travels. Other persons of interest for the earliest period of Kant's reception in Russia were Johann Schaden and Wilhelm Mellmann, who were among the first to teach his ideas in Russia.

The author then turns to early nineteenth-century reactions to Kant. Aleksandr Lubkin was apparently the first to give a detailed critique of Kant's philosophy in his 'Letters on Critical Philosophy' (1805), in which he accused Kant of subjectivism and of mathematical psychologism. Then, in 1819, Jan Śniadecki published an article in which he accused Kant of being unable to prove his basic premises, of making fanciful divisions, and of metaphysical mysticism. The author also examines invited German professors and Russian professors such as Philipp Reinhard, Johann Buhle, Lev Cvetaev, Johann Fincke, Gavril Solncev and Vasilij Pervoshchikov. The latter, who is

characterized as one of the most outspoken reactionaries to the Copernican revolution in philosophy, is said to have ‘charged Kant with an extreme epistemological subjectivism, a charge that would reverberate through the decades ahead in Russia’ (p. 49). One emerging trend thus far is that invited German professors were generally ‘sympathetic to Kantianism, or at least to German Idealism, whereas those most outspoken against it were native Russians’ (p. 41).

The author then moves to the period of the reign of Tsar Nicholas I (1825–55), which he characterizes as a philosophical dark age. Despite the perilousness of practising philosophy during this period, some managed to give Kant’s ideas a fair hearing. Among them were Danilo Vellanskij, who is said to have held that ‘Kant was wrong to conclude that knowledge of externality is impossible’ (p. 109) and Nikolay Stankevich, who introduced Kant and German idealism to Mikhail Bakunin. In turn, the latter became a Fichtean for a while before eventually leaving the island of the lotus-eaters and reconciling with reality. Petr Chaadaev criticized Kant as well, but is also said to have ‘valued Kant’s Critical philosophy as the most profound and strictest philosophical system’ (p. 115).

The 1860s saw a philosophical revival. To this period belong Petr Lavrov, who agreed with Kant that we ‘cannot know the essence of things’ (p. 136), Vasily Karpov, who found Kant’s ethics ‘hostile to our moral and religious convictions’ (p. 147) and Pamfil Jurkevich (Vladimir Solovyov’s mentor), who believed that ‘with Kant, philosophy descended into ... madness’ (p. 148). A pivotal year was 1867, when Mikhail Vladislavlev published the first Russian translation of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Among those active in the 1870s were Nikolai Debolsky, who aimed to show that ‘cognition of what exists in itself, a theory of things in themselves, is possible’ (p. 159), and Vladimir Lesevich, a student of Lavrov, who, as a positivist, praised Kantianism for its ‘rejection of metaphysics’ (p. 169), yet found in Kant’s philosophy ‘a false psychological theory’ (p. 168). Also noteworthy for this period is Mikhail Karinskij, who thought that the foundation of Kant’s philosophy is ‘seriously mistaken’ and that its mistake lies ‘in assuming that there are fundamental laws governing all mental functions’ (p. 173). Most important is Vladimir Solovyov, who, in *The Crisis of Western Philosophy* (1874), portrayed Kant as a key player in the decline of Western philosophy.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century in St Petersburg, Aleksej Kozlov defended a doctoral dissertation with Vladislavlev titled *The Genesis of the Transcendental Aesthetic (or of the Theory of Space and Time) in Kant* (1884), in which he criticized Kant. Around the same time, Aleksandr Vvedenskij arose as the ‘leader of Russian Kantianism’ (p. 223). Of interest in this regard is a dispute between Karinskij and Vvedenskij around the latter’s objection to Karinskij’s interpretation of Kant’s notion of time. Meanwhile in Moscow, Nikolaj Grot, who was the first editor of the journal *Questions of*

*Philosophy and Psychology*, wrote an article titled ‘On Time’ (1894), in which ‘he presented his most detailed critique of Kant’s positions on space and time’ (p. 239), and Lev Lopatin, who inherited the editorship of Grot’s journal and whose perspective was deeply indebted to Solovyov, was of the opinion that ‘[h]owever highly we may value the historical role of Kant, it pales before that of Descartes’ (p. 246).

The author also looks at attempts by the ‘legal Marxists’ at the turn of the century (roughly 1894–1901) to combine Kant with Marx. Among the legal Marxists were the young Sergej Bulgakov, Petr Struve and Nikolai Berdjaev. Despite these attempts, however, Berdjaev was ‘averse from the start to Kant’s ethical formalism, to his denial of the possibility of spiritual experience, to his view of a purely rational religion, and to the exaggerated importance Kant attached to mathematical physics’ (p. 258). To this period also belongs Sergej Trubetskoj, who ‘saw himself as an heir of Kant’ (p. 263), but who nonetheless criticized Kant on the issue of the existence of the external world; for him, ‘space, for example, is not just an epistemic, i.e., logical, condition of cognition, but also an ontic one’ (p. 263).

Among noteworthy figures of the first decade of the twentieth century was one of Grot’s students, Georgij Chelpanov, who met Kant halfway with his view ‘that specific physiological conditions correspond to *a priori* concepts’ (p. 272). In turn, Chelpanov’s most famous student from Kiev University was Gustav Shpet, ‘whose undergraduate thesis was on whether Kant resolved Hume’s problem of causality’ (p. 275). Shpet reached the conclusion that ‘the phenomenalistic interpretation of the law of causality by Kant is quite correct’ (p. 276). Also belonging to that period are figures such as Pavel Novgorodcev, who contributed to the elaboration of a Kant-inspired philosophy of law, and Vladimir Vernadskij, a famous scientist who paid particular attention to Kant’s scientific works.

The author then provides a closer look at Vvedenskij and his students at the University of St Petersburg, among whom were Ivan Lapshin, who was at first sympathetic to Kantianism, but who later distanced himself from it. Another prominent student of Vvedenskij, Nikolaj Losskij, provided the third Russian translation of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* as well as a translation of Kant’s *De mundi sensibilis atque intelligibilis forma et principiis* and *Fortschritte der Metaphysik seit Leibniz und Wolff*. Despite these translations, however, Losskij – a follower of Kozlov and Solovyov – was a staunch anti-Kantian; his intuitionist epistemology was intended as a means to overcome the philosophy of Kant and to justify a return to metaphysics.

The First World War sparked anti-German and nationalist reactions among Russian philosophers. Vladimir Ern, a student of Sergej Trubetskoj and Lopatin in Moscow, published a dissertation on Vincenzo Gioberti, who was the chief representative of Italian ontologism. A defender of ontologism

himself, Ern attacked Kant by linking him to the rise of German militarism. The Kantian philosophy came under attack from several other directions. Aleksandr Ognëv, a follower of Losskij, accused Kant of failing to grasp the function of intellectual intuition, through which we intuit ideal relations. And Sergej Trubetskoi's younger brother, Evgenij, published *The Metaphysical Pre-suppositions of Knowledge: An Attempt to Overcome Kant and Kantianism* (1917). The survey of this last period ends with Boris Jakovenko, who believed that the way forward was with Hermann Cohen, and Boris Fokht, who was also a follower of Cohen.

Although readers will gain here a lucid and thorough understanding of the particular phases of the *Kantrezeption* in Imperial Russia, they might find a general discussion wanting. But, if any generalization comes out with much clarity from this survey, it is that the Russian reaction to Kant has been mostly negative. Even though there were Russian Neo-Kantians, Russian philosophy was predominantly inclined toward ontologism and has remained so throughout its confrontation with the Kantian philosophy. The author observes in this regard that Germany had to wait for the ontological projects of Martin Heidegger and Nicolai Hartmann to arrive at an analogous stance. But, as the author also remarks, Hartmann was a Baltic German from Riga, which was then part of the Russian Empire, and he studied as an undergraduate under Losskij in St Petersburg. As it turns out, Hartmann's critical ontology was to some extent itself a continuation of the tradition of Russian ontologism, so much so that we could even say that the 'dekantianification' of German philosophy was partly of Russian origins.

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