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Marian Broda, Jurija Afanasjewą zmagania z Rosją [Yury Afanasiev's struggles with Russia]

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**Marian Broda, *Jurija Afanasjewa zmagania z Rosją*
[Yury Afanasiev's struggles with Russia],
Łódź: Ibidem, 2015, pp. 183.**

“Russia cannot be grasped with the mind
Or measured with a standard/common yardstick,
She has a peculiar character –
In Russia, one can only believe”¹



– this popular quatrain by Tyutchev could be a catchphrase of the latest monograph by Marian Broda, a specialist in Russian philosophical, religious and political thought, professor at the University of Łódź, Poland. The question of impossibility embedded in solving and understanding the ‘Russian riddle’ re-appears throughout his works that address the complexities of Russian philosophy, cultural tradition, and mentality. This time, Broda looks at the Russian question through the work of the well-known Russian historian and thinker, Yury Afanasiev. For Broda, the analysis of Afanasiev’s thought is, however, a mere pretext to look closely at the post-Soviet intelligentsia in general. By situating Afanasiev’s work in a wider context, Broda discusses what we may call ‘Russian struggles with Russia,’ i.e. how Russian thinkers attempt to problematize and conceptualize Russian reality, how they interpreted Russian history, and what they thought Russia’s future mission was. In his monograph, Broda proves that to grasp Russia with one’s mind is challenging not only for the outsiders, but also for the Russians themselves.

1 Unless stated otherwise, all translations are by the Author.

Yury Afanasiev was one of the most interesting and controversial figures of late- and post-Soviet Russia. He was the founder of the Moscow Historical Archive Institute and a long-time rector of the Russian State Humanities University which was established in 1991. A 'radical occidentalist', as Adam Michnik called him once, Afanasiev was a strong supporter of *perestroika*. Not only was he a member of the *Democratic Russia* and *Independent Civic Initiative* movements, but also a deputy to the parliament of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. In 1993, however, he withdrew from politics and devoted himself to the academic career. His academic interests included political sciences, history, and historiography, especially the *Annales* School. Yury Afanasiev is the author of numerous articles, essays, and monographs in which he offered a deep analysis of Russian history and culture as well as critical prospects on the present-day Russian reality. His works, pointing at current problems of the Russian Federation, henceforth cause heated disputes and arguments both in Russia and Western Europe. Sadly, Broda's monograph on Afanasiev was published shortly after Afanasiev's death in September 2015.

The monograph is organized in five chapters, in which the author provides a comprehensive analysis of Yury Afanasiev's thought. Focusing on various texts, Marian Broda diligently evaluates the academic and intellectual output of the Russian thinker. Each chapter of the volume deals with different pieces of Afanasiev's work and hence refers to different challenges faced by the thinker as he attempted to solve the 'Russian riddle'. Specifically, in the first chapter, Broda focuses on Afanasiev's most famous monograph² that examines the specific character of Russian power and its complex entanglement with society. In the second chapter, Broda discusses the essay 'Aren't we slaves?'³, which seeks to explain Russian history and its influence on today's developments. The third part of the volume focuses on a 'sequel' of the same essay titled 'The Holocaust on the Russian soil...'⁴. Chapter

2 Ю. Афанасьев [Y. Afanasev], *Опасная Россия* [Dangerous Russia], Москва [Moscow]: Российский государственный гуманитарный университет [Russian State Humanistic University], 2001.

3 Ю. Афанасьев [Y. Afanasev], 'Мы – не рабы?' [Aren't we slaves?], *Континент* [Continent], no. 138, 2008, <http://magazines.russ.ru/continent/2008/138/af11.html> (2016-10-21).

4 Ю. Афанасьев [Y. Afanasev], 'Холокост на русской почве: метаморфозы исторической памяти' [The Holocaust on the Russian soil: metamorphoses of historical memory], *Континент* [Continent], no. 148, 2011, <http://magazines.russ.ru/continent/2008/138/af11.html> (2016-10-21).

four is dedicated to an article ‘Go forward! No coming back!’⁵ written by Anfanasiev together with Davydov and Pelipenko as a critical response to the, at that time President of the Russian Federation, Dmitriy Medvedev’s speech to the Russian Duma titled ‘Russia, go forward!’⁶. In the concluding chapter, Broda locates Afanasiev’s ‘struggles with Russia’ in a wider context of similar endeavours undertaken by Russian intelligentsia, especially by the pro-Western (occidental) milieu, since the nineteenth century.

Afanasiev’s texts are for Marian Broda a point of departure for a broader analysis of a whole range of difficulties involved in solving the ‘Russian riddle’, both by Russians and foreigners. Afanasiev addresses this question, for instance, in *Dangerous Russia*⁷. Here Afanasiev endeavours to find the key to the ‘enchanted Russia’. He also addresses the question why, throughout the centuries, Russia did not manage to identify its own way of civilizational development.

Scrutinizing and interpreting not only Russian history, but also Russian philosophical, social and political thought, Afanasiev arrives at the conclusion that the main problem of Russian social life is an ontological discrepancy. In his view, there is a dissonance between a declarative reality – tangible and existing – and the actual, hidden reality, which should be revealed in order to ultimately transform Russia. Furthermore, Afanasiev argues, institutions such as the state, the parliament, civil society, and democracy exist in Russia only on a nominal level, and phenomena behind these terms are completely different and incompatible with the corresponding terms in the West. The reason for this and, at the same time, a key to the ‘Russian riddle’ is, for Afanasiev, the specificity of Russian power and its relation to society. Combining contradictory features – individual and collective, majestic and hideous, caring and oppressive – Russian power exists beyond Russian society. Further, its subsequent incarnations such as

5 Ю. Афанасьев, А. Давыдов, А. Пелипенко [Y. Afanasev, A. Davydov, A. Pelipenko], ‘Вперёд! Нельзя назад!’ [Go forward! No coming back!], *Континент* [Continent], no. 141, 2009, <http://magazines.russ.ru/continent/2008/138/af11.html> (2016-10-21).

6 Д. Медведев [D. Medvedev], ‘Россия, вперёд!’ [Russia, go forward!], *События*, Президент России [President of Russia], September 10, 2009, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/5413> (2016-10-21).

7 Ю. Афанасьев [Afanasev, Y.], *Опасная Россия* [Dangerous Russia], op. cit.

the tsardom, Bolshevism and Putin's regime are in fact self-reproductions of the same system.

'Russia is dangerous,' Afanasiev suggests.⁸ The dangerous character of Russia is rooted in its unsatisfied ambitions to be a superpower. He claims that due to the specific interrelation between power and society, as well as a discrepancy between the world 'as it is' and the world 'as it should be,' Russia is suppressed in a vicious circle of various illusions and legends. Hence, whenever the reality does not match the ideal, Russians tend to escape into ideological myths, for example the myth of the Great Russia or the myth of Moscow as the Third Rome.⁹ This messianic early Christian conception of Russia's role in the worlds forms one of the ideological foundations of Russian imperialism. Afanasiev insists that Russia would not be dangerous if it abandoned its imperial fantasies. Looking at the situation in Ukraine, one can argue that it will not happen very soon.

Apart from criticizing Russian imperialism, Afanasiev accuses Russia of the lack of self-criticism and self-awareness, rejection of Enlightenment, and a hatred towards the enemy, often represented in the ultimate terms as the devil. Also, being a declared opponent of Putin's regime, Afanasiev blames Putin and Medvedev for treating Russian society as yet another resource. Afanasiev blames that regime for consolidating backwardness and maintaining a façade democracy, which is just a guise for non-reformable authoritarianism. Afanasiev criticizes Russia because he wants to disenchant it and, as a result, include it in the European course of history. Hence, he attempts to demonstrate that only a consistent, multidimensional and deep transformation of Russian reality, both on the level of mentality and institutions, can lead to positive changes.

Since the model of further Russian development suggested by Afanasiev is based on European values and patterns, Broda situates his

8 Ibid.

9 The idea of Moscow as the Third Rome was developed in the sixteenth century by the monk Philoteus of Psov. He claimed that Moscow, as the successor of Byzantium and Rome was, in fact, the third and the last Rome, i.e. the Kingdom of God and the Tsar's role was to defeat the anti-Christian forces. Cf. A. de Lazari, *Czy Moskwa będzie Trzecim Rzymem? Studia o nacjonalizmie rosyjskim* [Will Moscow be the Third Rome? Studies on Russian nationalism], Katowice: Śląsk, 1996; P. Duncan, *Russian Messianism: Third Rome, Holy Revolution, Communism and After*, London, New York: Routledge, 2000.

thought in a wider context of Russian contemporary intelligentsia. Broda collates Afanasiev's ideas with those developed by pro-Western thinkers and political scholars such as Kara-Murza¹⁰, Poliakov¹¹, Shevtsova¹² and Kantor¹³. Like Afanasiev, all these authors criticize Russian backwardness in regard to the West. Also, they tend to rationalize this state of affairs with Russian specificity and uniqueness. Their writings, however, should be situated in the context of the long-lasting disputes between Slavophiles and Westernizers, triggered by Chaadayev's letter in the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Whereas Slavophiles suggested a total turndown of Western influences and a return to the old Russian tradition, Westernizers proposed a reverse strategy: the total Europeanization of Russia.

According to Marian Broda, this rupture within the Russian intelligentsia and a perpetual competition between two opposing models of Russian development, strongly marked the Russian attitude towards the West. In consequence, it varies from an admiration to a complete rejection of the Western values. Broda argues that this attitude leads to a trap of bipolar thinking, based on either-or categories and significantly reduces a cognitive perspective on the 'Russian riddle'. Broda maintains that in order to find a key to the 'enchanted Russia', Russian thinkers – and Afanasiev among them – should first overcome their

- 10 A Russian philosopher and political scientist; the author of more than 20 books and 200 academic papers, for instance: А. Кара-Мурза [A. Kara-Murza], *Большевизм и коммунизм: интерпретации в русской культуре* [Bolshevism and Communism: Interpretations in Russian Culture], Санкт-Петербург: Русский христианский гуманитарный ин-т [Russian Christian University of Humanities], 1996; А. Кара-Мурза [A. Kara-Murza], 'Либерализм против хаоса' [Liberalism against Chaos], *Полит. Политические исследования* [Polis. Political Research], no. 3, issue 118, 1994.
- 11 A Russian historian and political scientist, works at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow; co-author of the monograph *Большевизм и коммунизм: интерпретации в русской культуре* [Bolshevism and Communism: Interpretations in Russian Culture].
- 12 A Russian historian and political scientist; author of numerous publications, for instance: Л. Шевцова [L. Shevtsova], *Россия Ельцина: мифы и реальность* [Yeltsin's Russia: Myths and Reality], New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999; Л. Шевцова [L. Shevtsova], *Россия Путина* [Putin's Russia], Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003.
- 13 A Russian writer, philosopher, and literary scholar; the author of such publications as В. Кантор [V. Kantor], *Между произволом и свободой. К вопросу о русской ментальности* [Between Turanny and Freedom: Question of Russian Mentality], *Российская Политическая Энциклопедия* [Russian Political Encyclopedia], 2007 and В. Кантор [V. Kantor], *Русская классика, или бытие России* [Russian Classic or Existence of Russia], Москва: Центр гуманитарных инициатив. Университетская книга [Centre of Humanistic Initiatives. University Book], 2014.
- 14 Cf. A. Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Marxism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979 and N. Berdayaev, *Russian idea*, New York: Macmillan, 1948.

intellectual habits of ‘essentializing’ and absolutizing structures and mechanisms shaping Russian reality.

By locating his insightful analysis of Yury Afanasiev’s intellectual output in a wider context of the Russian intellectual tradition, Broda makes a case of the typical difficulties faced by a pro-European Russian intelligent, thinker and scholar. While on the one hand, Afanasiev struggles to dismantle a chain of traditional assumptions about Russia, on the other hand, he shares them. Being entangled in a specific discourse, the Russian thinker is not able to transgress it, to go beyond it. Thus, according to Broda, Afanasiev makes a cardinal mistake trying to find a key to the ‘enchanted Russia’ – he assumes that there only one key exists. In fact, his writings contain only one of the many truths about Russia and the ‘Russian riddle’. In this context, Broda’s monograph proves that questions about Russia are never neutral towards their subject.

In conclusion, Broda’s captivating work, referring to numerous texts and contexts, not only enables the reader to understand Russian mentality and intellectual tradition better, but also offers a new perspective on solving the ‘Russian riddle’. Even though the current political situation seems to confirm many of Afanasiev’s diagnoses, especially with regard to Putin’s regime and the situation in Ukraine, Broda does not exploit Afanasiev’s intellectual achievements by yielding them to one, dominant assertion. Therefore, Broda’s monograph maintains an objective academic character. The monograph is a rich and interdisciplinary study that will be of great interest not only for scholars dealing with Russian philosophical, religious and political thought or interested in Russian historiography, but also for all readers trying to understand Russia, rather than simply believe in it.

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