CHAPTER 2

Orientology, Philology and the Politics of Empire: Traditional Intellectuals in Late Imperial Russia

The relationship of Russia to its colonies and, by extension, Russians to the other peoples of the Empire, was a significant concern for liberal intellectuals and could not but colour their reflections on language and culture. We have seen that the liberal project involved an aspiration for a united, multinational empire that would be renewed through democratic reform and long-term national cultural development, but this never crystallised into a coherent party programme. The problematic of hegemony, if not the term itself, was raised continually as reform-minded intellectuals ruminated on the increasingly restive relationship between the imperial state and its colonies. Such scholars often made important attempts to influence imperial policy through research and sometimes more directly, by intervening in political debate. As they focused on the relationship between the official language and dialectal forms within Russian-speaking areas, or between Russian and the myriad other languages spoken by the peoples of the Empire, philologists could not but raise issues central to the linguistic and cultural dimensions of hegemony. The extremely significant and subtle research that emerged consistently problematised the relationship between standard and non-standard forms, as well as the way in which relations of authority and intellectual subordination were exercised, without these analyses ever quite achieving a fully elaborated form. This resulted from an intellectual field sandwiched between positivism and psychologism, which ultimately rendered these traditional intellectuals unable to grasp the specificity of the social, ensuring that it tended to be assimilated either to the realm of natural laws or to the realm of psychology.

Oriental Studies and Empire

One particularly clear example was the new school of orientology that emerged at St. Petersburg University in the 1890s under the leadership of Baron

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1 I use the term ‘traditional intellectual’ in the Gramscian sense of a professional intellectual not having arisen from a popular movement and in contradistinction to the idea of the ‘organic intellectual’.
Viktor Rozen, which included such notable figures as the Indiologist, Sergei Ol’denburg, the historian of Central Asia, Vasilii Bartol’d, and the philologist and archaeologist, Nikolai Marr. As Vera Tolz has shown in an important recent study, Rozen reoriented Oriental studies towards ‘Russia’s own orient’ and presented Russia not as the property of one ethnicity, but as a space of communication for all peoples of the Empire, whether from the west or east.\(^2\) This was part of a general reorientation within the humanities at St. Petersburg University, in which specialists in European and Asian languages and cultures converged and centred their scholarship on the territory of the Russian Empire. They viewed the space occupied by the Empire not as, in the words of the German linguist, August Friedrich Pott, a ‘Völkerbrücke aus Asien nach Europa’, that is, a bridge of peoples from Asia to Europe,\(^4\) but as an arena for the interaction of national cultures including, but not limited to, the Indo-European or ‘Indo-Aryan’ family. Representative of the impressive range of scholars who may be included are one of the founders of comparative literature, Aleksandr Veselovskii, the linguists, Jan Baudouin de Courtenay and Aleksei Shakhmatov, and the historian of art, Nikodim Kondakov. The scholars who will be discussed in this chapter were often in close contact with each other. Veselovskii, Baudouin and Marr attended meetings of the Neo-Philological Society at St. Petersburg University from 1885.\(^5\) Veselovskii maintained regular correspondence with a number of Orientalists, including Rozen, Marr and Ol’denburg.\(^6\)

Drawing on the recent innovations of German orientology, Rozen’s new approach questioned the simple hierarchical dichotomies of the rational West, Russia and Orthodox Christianity versus irrational Asia and the non-Christian East. Orientalism was becoming professionalised and, in so doing, it defined itself in opposition to the dilettantism of missionaries. As Mark Batunsky has argued, Rozen generated a new research agenda, organised concrete programmes, facilitated a critique of existing approaches, brought expert knowledge to bear on all stages of research, inaugurated effective communication of new knowledge among researchers and brought about the practical realisation

\(^2\) On Rozen, see, *inter alia*, Krachkovskii 1947; Batunskii 2003, pp. 7–60. See also the collection of articles by his students, Rozen 1897. I will limit my discussion of Marr here and take up the main aspects of his work in a later chapter.

\(^3\) Tolz 2011.

\(^4\) Quoted in Benes 1984, p. 117.

\(^5\) Anon. 1914; *PFA ARAN* R-IV/24/4. The Neo-Philological Society began as the Romano-Germanic section of the Neo-Philological Society at the imperial St. Petersburg University. For a short history of the Society’s activity, see Petrov 1910.

\(^6\) Kulikova 2001, pp. 142–59. For more on Marr and Veselovskii, see Shishmarev 1937.