I. The Orient in Russian Thought at the Turn of the Century

Marlène Laruelle

THE GENESIS OF EURASIANISM

The Orient occupies a unique space in the history of Russian thought. A number of intellectuals have taken an interest in this theme since the nineteenth century in order to define the place of Russia in the world and its relations with Europe. Nevertheless, Orient can have different meanings: Byzantium, Caucasus, the Muslim world, India, China, . . . Orient can also be internal to Russia, from the turcospeaking peripheries of the Volga to the Siberian Far East. The position of Russia toward this Orient is ambiguous: doesn’t Russia itself constitute an Orient facing Europe? Petr Y. Chadaaev sensed this paradox and was anxious to specify that to be situated at the Orient of Europe didn’t necessarily mean to be the Orient (Chadaaev 1970: 205).

As a founding theme in Russian thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Orient is present in many areas of human thought. The half-century between the 1870s and the 1920s sees the emergence of this theme in Russian geography (the idea of the third continent), historiography (rehabilitation of Moscovy under the Tatar yoke), philosophy (Vladimir Soloviev’s pan-mongolism), literature (the decadent symbolists and the theme of Huns and Scythians), and especially art (Nikolai Rerikh’s orientalistic painting) more than in the ideological geopolitical field (the “Oriental” movement). The theme is intrinsically dependent on some classical philosophical and political postulates in the history of ideas in Russia: totality, organicism, spirituality, anti-individualism, death of Europe, empire. Whether considered “internal” or “external,” it is another way of thinking about Russia and a possible expression of numerous Russian intellectuals’ doubt about the place and the nature of the object “Russia.”

Eurasianist ideology is at the heart of reflections on the place of Orient in Russian thought: it endows theories on proximity between Russia and Orient with a scope never reached before. It is also the only ideology that pursues the ambiguousness of the definition: the Orient is at the same time in the “cultural areas” surrounding Russia (Islam, India, China)
and an internal entity, organic to Russia, the steppic world. This chapter will try to show the genesis of Eurasianism in the half-century that precedes its birth: the richness of philosophical currents as well as the development of orientalistic fashions in many fields of Russian thought announce the influence that Eurasianism, as a cultural and political movement, will have on the “Orient” (Laruelle 1999).

Everyone who has an interest in post-Soviet studies hears the terms “Eurasia” and “Eurasian.” Indeed, interest in Eurasianism and “Eurasia” has grown, and references can often be found in Russian and Western literature. What is Eurasianism? How was the movement and ideology born?

Eurasianism as an intellectual and political trend emerged in 1921 when a group of Russian émigrés published the brochure, “Turn to the East.” The movement attracted attention among the Russian diaspora and increased in size. By 1929, it experienced splits with the emergence of the left Eurasianists. By the end of World War II, Eurasianism was known in the USSR, with Lev Gumilev as a major representative. Upon the collapse of the USSR, it became a major ideological tenet of the “red to brown” opposition to the Yeltsin regime. In 2002, under Vladimir Putin, two Eurasian parties were launched.

In the process of political/ideological development, Eurasianism changed and diversified. At the same time, however, all representatives of the movement had a common ideological base. They assumed that Russia-Eurasia is a distinct civilizational unit, different from both Asia and Europe. In some Eurasianists’ doctrines, Eurasia included Europe and a good part of Asia proper. In recent years Eurasianism has been discussed, at least briefly, in many articles and books. Still, there is much to be done for a comprehensive study of the movement. To our knowledge there are actually only two book-length monographs that treat Eurasianism at length (Boss 1961; Laruelle 1999). Russian works on the subject often are polemical writings whose major goals are not so much the elaboration of Eurasianism as the promotion of this or that political creed. Even less work has been done on Eurasianism in historical context.

The present work could well be regarded as the first step in showing how Eurasianism emerged and developed over the course of time. The first part of the book deals with historical Eurasianism, the second with the transition from historical Eurasianism to its more recent modifications. The focus here is on the approach to Jews and how Eurasianist views on Jews changed in the course of time.

The chapters by Françoise Lesourd and Ryszard Paradowski provide a focus on Lev P. Karsavin (1882–1952), one of the leading Eurasianist philosophers, whose philosophy provides a good overview of the tenets of the movement. Karsavin discarded Western culture because of its stress on the individual and particular. These aspects of Western civi-