Mjør, Kåre Johan
Language: English.

Since Marc Raeff’s Russia Abroad (1990), scholars have increasingly paid attention to the fate of the revolution’s émigrés. In an interdisciplinary literary study, scholar Kåre Johan Mjør has attempted to bring a stronger focus to the émigrés’ contribution to the intellectual history of Russia. While Mjør’s case study is narrow, focusing on only four authors, and is somewhat problematic in its claims, he does offer scholarship a unique effort to broaden our definition of historiography and the voices that made Russia Abroad.

Reformulating Russia is a study of first-wave (1918–1940) Russian émigré writers’ cultural and intellectual historiography. The book’s goals are multiple. In the author’s words, they are “not only to present the dominant ideas of selected Russian émigrés but to demonstrate how they were made possible, how they were brought about and how they reflect and refract the anatomy of exile” (24). Those selected works were deliberately chosen by Mjør from an atypical group, lesser-known historical pieces from writers of the Tsarist Russia diaspora: Saints of Ancient Russia by Georgii Fedotov (1931); Ways of Russian Theology by Georgii Florovskii (1937); The Russian Idea by Nikolai Berdiaev (1946); and History of Russian Philosophy by Vasilii Zenkovskii (1948–1950). Ultimately, Mjør suggests the first two were heavily influenced by a common belief that the Bolshevik regime would fall (1920s–1930s); the last two works, published in the post-World War II period, were less confident in this, offering less specific timelines for a reclamation of Russia. Notably, Mjør shows that both of the last books avoided the rallying-cry language of earlier books which described the émigré life (and publication) as a “task” to rebuild Russia (299). From this, Mjør argues that a “fundamental change in the self-awareness of Russian first-wave émigrés” had occurred (299).

To make this claim, the book is organized in two parts designed to frame the reading of these works. In the first part (“Contexts”), Mjør discusses at length the émigré worldview, quoting nonfiction and literary sources to find “the cultural mission of Russia Abroad,” which he describes as preservation and “as far as possible” continuity (47, 48). He pays especial attention to alternative visions of Russia Abroad, from those espousing a strong Orthodox identity to what he refers to as “the Eurasianist interpretation,” which emphasized Russia’s historic connection with the Mongol past (51). Within this section, Mjør also describes the contours of imperial Russian historiography. Here he uses the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Vasilii Kliuchevevskii’s The Boyar Duma
as his touchstone, defining his writers by their response to the 1932 anniversary of this piece of Russian historiography. This provides some background for the historical foundations on which Mjør’s writers built, and explains some of their objections to the past; namely, the lack of an interest in “spiritual culture,” a failing that would prompt all four of Mjør’s authors to take an intense interest in discussing a history of Russian spirituality (56–67). Part One of Reformulating Russia is therefore intended to give the writer a sense of the émigré mentality and the historical scholarship they had inherited.

Part Two begins Mjør’s close reading of the four authors, each granted their own chapter. Within the chapters, Mjør asks how each author viewed Russian history and what their unique contribution to the idea of Russia was. For Fedotov, for example, Mjør shows the connections between a concept of history as tragedy and traditional Orthodox theological stances on free will and sin (99). His “Russia” was therefore one “in accordance with what he held to be its highest values, above all an allegedly unique Russian form of Christianity” (100) which made exile meaningful by understanding human weakness (151). Florovskii, likewise, saw in Orthodoxy an element of Russianness; this Russian self, according to Mjør’s reading of Florovskii, was Byzantine, not Western European, by nature (200). Ways of Russian Theology thus explains how Russian intellectual history lost its way, mistakenly looking away from its roots (the East) to the West—an error Florovskii likens to a Babylonian captivity (201). Berdiaev, who had been dedicated to saving the Russian philosophical heritage even before the revolution, saw in the revolution a moment divinely established for Russia’s rebirth (209). The revolution and civil war were not to be regretted for causing suffering, which was a matter of nature and therefore unavoidable (233). Indeed, humanity could do nothing to change the outcome of history, according to Mjør’s understanding of Berdiaev. While this might seem a grim thought, Mjør explains that Berdiaev’s point is triumph: an eternal Russia exists and would overcome the temporary pains of exile. Finally, in the last chapter on the writers, dedicated to Zenkovskii, Mjør provides his reader with an analysis of Zenkovskii’s history of Russian philosophy. This work, Mjør argues, translates the Russian philosophical experience into the Western framework of philosophy (e.g., its symbols and concepts). This is appropriate, Mjør finds, as Zenkovskii’s vision has a Russian philosophy which is built on dialectics—namely, a constant tension between East and West, unresolved and eternal (296). This tension comes from the incorporation of Western secular thought as a stream within Russian philosophy.

Ultimately, there is much that is credible and commendable in Reformulating Russia. The author’s argument is persuasive, although it rests on just four major