The Russian concept of kultura differs fundamentally from the Western notion of "culture," a difference that has long existed, at least from the eighteenth century. The conceptual divergence can be discerned in the works of the Russian Masons, especially those of the Johann Schwartz circle, which considered Russia to be its spiritual homeland. Students who attended his lectures at Moscow University learned that man was not a product of the material world and that culture, therefore, was the force that holds man above the abyss of organic existence.

Even before Schwartz Russians felt the palpable need for a special intellectual brotherhood. To this end, Simeon Polotsky (the Moscow and monastic name of the Belarus Samuil Emelianovich Sitnianovich-Petrovsky) formed a special circle in which he and his associates (Silvestr Medvedev, Karion Istomin, and Mardarii Khonikov) emerged as Russia's first professional writers, while their disciples, including Stepan Yavorsky and Dmitrii Rostovsky, soon came to be regarded as a group of like-minded intellectuals. Of course, this was an automatic reaction to the hostility and distrust that Peter the Great manifested towards the learned clergy.¹

The Polotsky circle was a natural defense. In one of his letters to Rostovsky, Yavorsky confessed: "Believe me, happy is the life of the man who is well hidden."² This was also the attitude of the Russian Symbolists, for their activities often bear the character of a conspiratorial circle — we think of Viacheslav Ivanov's Tower in St. Petersburg and the Argonauts in Moscow with Andrei Bely, Ellis (Lev Kobylnsky, and Sergei Soloviev. This kind of circle, therefore, was an experiment in creating a medium wherein the individual could still survive, even if cast into the chasm of inertia; and it was precisely in such conditions that Russian intellectuals often nurtured the idea of transforming the world via culture — their idea being that culture was merely a means, whereas the ultimate goal was the creation

². Ibid., p. 166.
of a totally new world (a new heaven and a new earth). This was one of the esthetic attainments of the Russian Symbolist movement.

In his essay on the sick and weary Russia (1910), Dmitrii Merezhkovsky wrote: "Heretofore Russia possessed a detached manifestation of higher culture with figures in solitude such as Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoi; and there was almost no sense of a cultural medium, no cultural consistency. The spark of enlightenment was passed on secretly, from hand to hand, just as the vestal flame or torch was passed in the mysteries. 3 "Secretly, from hand to hand" is the watchword of the intimate or monastic circle. In the West, however, culture tends to evolve by colonization, whereby inert existence transforms in a steady expansion of the human endeavor in which society participates. As a result, the intellectual circle does not assume the role of an island of individuality, as it does in Russia.

The current interest in RAKhN corroborates this position, for RAKhN also derived from the experiences of Russian intellectual circles, beginning with Simeon Polotsky. In the twentieth century the tradition was maintained with Georgii Chelpanov's seminars on psychology in Kiev (attended by the young Gustav Shpet), Ivan Ilin's seminar in Moscow (attended by Alexander Gabrichevsky), all of whom, with the exception of Ilin, were to become members of RAKhN. Nikolai Berdiaev described this intellectual atmosphere:

It occurred to me that it was essential to bring together the last prominent figures and establish a center so as to preserve the life of Russian spiritual culture. This did not really mean the revival of a religious or philosophical society. The group was to be broader, encompassing people of different viewpoints.

. . . . I was the instigator of the Free Academy of Spiritual Culture, which existed for three years (1919-21). . . . It was, I think, the only place in which thought flowed freely and which dealt with problems pertaining to the highest qualities of culture. 4

Many members of RAKhN were philosophers by training (including Berdiaev, until his enforced emigration in 1922) and their worldviews developed within the malleable forms of philosophy, art history, literary criticism, and cultural theory. True, they paid homage to their German men-