A History of Young Russia

INTRODUCTION

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, Michael Gershenzon's biographical studies in the history of Russian culture won him the nearly universal admiration of the Russian reading public. To the poet and novelist Andrei Belyi, Gershenzon was "the bard of our past." To the philosopher Vasilii Rozanov, he was the leading historian of Russian literary life "beyond all doubt and beyond all comparison." Even critics who questioned Gershenzon's historical judgment or rejected his philosophical principles conceded that his talents as a writer were extraordinary. 'Master' was the word they repeated: "a master of the psychological portrait," "a master of individual analysis," "a master of the artful tale, a superb stylist"—so ran the reviews of the day. When Gershenzon died in 1925, his literary immortality seemed assured. "The history of Russian literature," wrote the critic Leonid Grossman, "will forever cherish these profoundly distinctive works, with their charming spirituality and plastic beauty; and with them in memory will live the remarkable artist of the Russian word who created them."1

But Gershenzon's admirers misjudged the power of the cultural convulsion begun in Russia by the Bolshevik revolution. No work of Gershenzon has been published in the Soviet Union since the second edition of A History of Young Russia appeared in 1923. Though his name is still encountered in Russian reference books, Gershenzon is dismissed in an inch or two of print as a creature of the old order whose writings, tainted by religious sentiments and philosophical idealism, are unworthy of attention in an age of materialistic enlightenment. And the isolation (both political and linguistic) of the Soviet land has prevented the spread of Gershenzon's earlier fame to other countries. Today the simplest facts of his biography require recounting.2

Life and Works

Michael Osipovich Gershenzon was born in 1869 in Kishinev, then the capital of Bessarabia and now the capital of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, a city notorious for a vicious pogrom in 1903. The family was undistinguished and only intermittently comfortable; Michael's father suffered a succession of business failures. Michael attended Hebrew school and then the local gymnasium, from which he graduated in 1887—just as restrictions were imposed on the admission of Jews to the Russian universities.

In Gershenzon’s case the restrictions strengthened his parents’ hand: they fancied their boy an engineer, not a scholar. Accordingly Michael was sent off to a technical school in Berlin, where for two years he toyed with construction engineering while devoting his major attention to the lectures of the historian Heinrich von Treitschke and the philosopher Eduard Zeller which he audited at the university. In 1889 he could be dutiful no longer, and he applied for admission to Moscow University under the quota system. He was accepted, the only Jew to apply that year in history and philology.

Gershenzon’s five years at the university were dominated by the figure of one revered teacher, the historian Paul Vinogradov (the same Paul Vinogradov who later emigrated to England in protest against tsarist policies and spent the last decades of his life as a renowned professor of jurisprudence at Oxford University). In his work with Vinogradov, Gershenzon concentrated on ancient Greek history, and it was in that field that he did his first serious writing. His long essay, “Aristotle’s Athenian Constitution and Plutarch’s Lives,” for which he won a gold medal, was published by the university in 1895, the year following his graduation with the degree of Candidate.

As a non-Christian Gershenzon could go no further in the academic system of imperial Russia. Some students in his position qualified themselves for graduate work and an eventual professorship by converting to Christianity, but Gershenzon did not consider that alternative. At this juncture he set out instead upon an independent scholarly career, supporting himself and later his family chiefly by his pen.

Initially his work was not in Russian literature but in areas more closely related to his university study of Western history and languages. He published articles on Petrarch, on problems of education, on nineteenth century German literature. He did some freelance writing for a newspaper. Mostly, however, he did translations, including book-length translations which occupied much of his time and provided the bulk of his income during the last years of the nineteenth century. Chief among them were a translation from the German of Julius Beloch’s Griechische Geschichte and a translation from the French of Alfred Rambaud’s L’Histoire générale du IVe siècle jusqu’à nos jours.

Gershenzon’s first venture into the Russian field was the publication in 1900 of selections from the correspondence of the philosopher and social critic Peter Chaadaev. In the same year he acquired a mass of unpublished letters by a number of other Russian literary and cultural figures of the nineteenth century, particularly the second quarter of the nineteenth century. These rich relics of a heady formative age in Russian intellectual history immediately captured Gershenzon’s interest, and with their aid he began what was to be his lifelong work—the recreation of the thought and the spirit of that age through individual studies of some of its most expressive representatives.

His first major subject was the poet and social radical Nicholas Ogarev: Gershenzon published an edition of Ogarev’s correspondence in 1902, three articles dealing with Ogarev in 1903, and an edition of his verse in 1904. Other such studies followed in profusion in the next few years as Gershenzon constructed, man by man, a group portrait of the nascent Russian intelligentsia: an essay on Nicholas Stankevich, the brilliant young