

Russian Identity as an East-West Controversy Outlining a concept

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ONE OF THE SIGNIFICANT achievements of research in the humanities in the second half of the twentieth century is a growing critical awareness of the mythopoeic, disfiguring, and even manipulatory properties characteristic of much European or Western discourse about the rest of the world. Notions such as 'euro-centrism' and, more recently, 'orientalism', have become something of a revelation to many scholars and have inspired new directions of research in several academic disciplines. And no wonder! The problems raised and the results found will often have a clear relevance for both the historical and the current understanding of international relations. Research of this kind will often involve activities like the disclosure of hidden patterns in 'our own' mentality; repentant consideration of the sinister role played on various occasions by our 'civilised' Western ancestors or contemporaries; analysis of the symptoms and symbols of nationalism. All this seems important and holds a very understandable attraction for everyone who has been brought up to regard a sceptical attitude as a noble characteristic of the true intellectual.

In the field of Slavic studies this trend has brought a growing awareness of the nature and functions of Western ideas about Eastern Europe as a second-class Europe, more backward and less civilized than Europe proper. The Western imagining of Eastern Europe has deep historical roots. Larry Wolff's fairly recent book *Inventing Eastern Europe*, from 1994, with its elegant and ambiguous subtitle *The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, provides

impressive evidence of this. As Wolff sees it, the concept of Eastern Europe was constructed in eighteenth-century Western Europe, during the Enlightenment, and this is where the intellectual roots of the Iron Curtain and the Cold War are to be found. In a few years' time Wolff's book has become something of a modern classic in our field, and it has, quite logically, been listed as recommended reading for this conference. We have all turned the pages with excitement, eager to learn just how Eastern Europe was invented during the Enlightenment.

The purpose of the present paper is first to question one or two particular aspects of Wolff's book, and then to offer some suggestions on how the question of Russian identity might be approached historically as an ongoing dialogue or, rather, as an East-West Controversy.

Towards the end of the second millennium, creativity and originality seem to top the list of desirable qualities in learned authors. It is probably not too much of an exaggeration to say that there is an academic fashion in springing clever surprises on your unsuspecting colleagues. If Wolff had been a grayer kind of intellectual, he would have called his book 'West European Perceptions of Eastern Europe in the Age of Enlightenment', or something similar. But, although such a title would have given a fairly accurate representation of the subject matter, it would at the same time have sounded much like books already written half a century ago. Titles beginning with 'Inventing', on the contrary, point to a newer trend in intellectual history, after the inventing of deconstruction. But the chosen title raises another problem, formulated in the following way by one reviewer: 'Despite the excellence of Wolff's presentation and discussion of eighteenth-century sources, however, it never quite emerges what exactly he means by the Enlightenment's "invention" of Eastern Europe' (Tianu 1996, 308).

One thing that Wolff does not mean, as I discovered with some disappointment, is that the Enlighteners invented Eastern Europe in the sense that they actually started using the term 'Eastern Europe'. But, what is more, one gets the impression that Wolff strives to conceal this problem by lavish use of the verbal magic of paraphrase. Western eighteenth-century travelers and French *philosophes* of the Enlightenment undoubtedly thought of the various parts of Europe in terms of varying degrees of civilization, but the map of civilization that they had on their minds, did not have the name 'Eastern Europe'

written on it, no matter how often Wolff uses that word to rephrase what they actually wrote. One example will suffice to illustrate the technique. It is from the section about Voltaire's *History of Charles the Twelfth*:

When Voltaire followed Charles into the Ukraine, the book could no longer pretend to be about "the North" of Europe. The Ukraine was introduced by Voltaire as the "land of the Cossacks, situated between Little Tartary, Poland, and Muscovy," and that grouping of lands could only make sense as Eastern Europe. (Wolff 1994, 91)

One should note that 'Eastern Europe' is Wolff's word, not Voltaire's. It takes some effort on the part of the reader to remember, practically all through the book, that 'Eastern Europe' is not a word used by the eighteenth-century writers, but a highly frequent part of Wolff's own, somewhat pushy vocabulary.

As it turns out, the inventing of Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century amounts to somewhat less than the title seems to promise. The book demonstrates beyond any doubt that West European observers regarded Russia, Poland, Bohemia, and the parts of Europe under Turkish rule, as less civilized parts of Europe. One can only agree with Wolff when he concludes that 'the curious readers and armchair travelers of the ancien régime in Western Europe Confidently defined their own level of enlightened civilization when they imagined Eastern Europe with Voltaire as their guide' (Wolff 1994, 94). These countries represented the barbarian 'other' by contrast to the West, as did the Orient, according to Edward Said. Wolff's book offers a great many interesting examples of Western eighteenth-century perceptions of Eastern European countries, but it fails to prove that Eastern Europe was invented in the eighteenth century. And it was, indeed, bound to fail on this point, since this is simply not the case. The term 'Eastern Europe' is coined after the eighteenth century, while the Western idea of inferior civilization in these parts of the world is much older.

As for the history of the term, a Scandinavian might actually claim that Eastern Europe was invented by the vikings. Our ancestors had a word, in their old Norse tongue, for the part of the world which was later to become Russia. They called it 'Austrvegr'. At least the word has the component 'east' in it, even if 'Europe' was still missing. The runic stone found near Kolind in Jutland carries the

following inscription: 'Toste, the blacksmith of Asved, erected this stone for his brother Tue who met his death in the East' (Jacobsen & Moltke 1944, 29). The word for the East on the stone is 'ustr'. There are several similar runic inscriptions in Sweden, so obviously the vikings had some sort of Eastern Europe on their minds, and also a word for it. I shall not, however, venture to assert that these are the roots of the modern geopolitical term... .

But I would not hesitate to claim that the conceptual roots of a dividing line between 'civilized' and 'barbarian' in Europe go back as far as to the *limes* of the Roman Empire. Wolff argues convincingly that the term 'civilization' is an eighteenth-century invention. But the corresponding opposite notion of barbarism was coined by the ancient Greeks. The French *philosophes* of the Enlightenment were certainly not the first to discover that, for instance, the Russians were barbarians. The Greeks of Byzantium knew that almost a millennium before Voltaire. In a sermon on the occasion of the first full-scale Russian attack on Constantinople in 860, the Patriarch Photios gave the following rhetorically elaborated portrait of these early Eastern Europeans, from the point of view of the civilized inhabitants of the second Rome:

An obscure nation, a nation of no account, a nation ranked among slaves, unknown, but which has won a name from the expedition against us, insignificant, but now become famous, humble and destitute, but now risen to a splendid height and immense wealth, a nation dwelling somewhere far from our country, barbarous, nomadic, armed with arrogance, unwatched, unchallenged, leaderless, has so suddenly, in the twinkling of an eye, like a wave of the sea, poured over our frontiers, and as a wild boar has devoured the inhabitants of the land like grass, or straw, or a crop (O, the God-sent punishment that befell us!), sparing nothing from man to beast, not respecting female weakness, not pitying tender infants, not reverencing the hoary hairs of old men, softened by nothing that is wont to move human nature to pity, even when it has sunk to that of wild beasts, but boldly thrusting their sword through persons of every age and sex. (Mango 1958, 981)

If we look for the deepest roots of the notion of the backward Eastern Europeans, I think we must admit that they are to be found in the ancient Roman distinction between the well-regulated world inside the Roman border line, the so-called *limes*, and the barbarian world beyond. Wolff stresses that by the eighteenth century the barbarian world was located more to the east than to the north on a map of Europe (Scandinavians should thus be grateful to the Enlighteners, since

this implied the exclusion of Scandinavia from the dark, uncivilized part of Europe). But one should not exaggerate the relative novelty of associating barbarism with the east, since the limes, at the height of Roman power, did not divide Europe into a proper northern and a proper southern part. Following the Danube and the Rhine in continental Europe, and cutting across Britannia roughly between England and Scotland, the limes divided Europe into a southwestern and a northeastern part. More historical roots of the imagined borderline than can be accounted for in this short paper, are, of course, to be found in the division of the Roman empire into an Eastern and a Western part, in the rivalry between Byzantium and the new Western empires, in the great schism, in the fall of Constantinople to the Turks.

One specific contribution of the enlightened *philosophes* might actually be that they tried (though not very hard) to offer some recognition of the 'civilizing' efforts of Peter the Great and later rulers, rather than only repeating the clichés about barbarism inherited from the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century travelers. But that in itself often turned out to be yet another negative Eastern European quality: The comical 'aping' of civilized conduct.¹ Only in some rather farfetched sense can one maintain that Eastern Europe, even as a mental entity, was an eighteenth-century 'invention'. 'Imagining' might perhaps be a better word than 'inventing' ?

In spite of these critical remarks (regarding the absence of the term 'Eastern Europe' in the eighteenth century and the lack of absolute novelty in the ideas of the eighteenth-century literati about these parts of the world) we should all be grateful to Wolff for his wide-ranging demonstration of the surprising unanimity in the En-lighteners' rather unenlightened and cliché-ridden notions about Eastern Europe. It is, indeed, important to realize that numerous generations of 'us' in the West have been exposed to simplified, negative ideas about Eastern Europe, handed down to us by a long tradition. May I add that my own investigation into the portrayal of the Russians in three centuries of Danish geography text books fully

¹ As Just Juel, Danish envoy to Russia 1709-11, put it, '...even if the Russians at present are trying to ape other nations in manners, even if they dress in French clothes [...] the peasant nevertheless remains deep-seated in them' (quoted from Møller 1997a, 53). Puškin, in his prose fragment 'Roslavlev', puts the expression 'these monkeys of the Enlightenment' (эти обезьяны просвещения) into the mouth of his heroine Polina, as she describes what she thinks is Madame de Staël's view of the Russian intellectual élite, cf Puškin 1975, 120.

confirms the amazing stability of a fairly limited number of 'truths' (Møller 1993).

It is also important to understand to what extent these images have affected people in Eastern Europe in the course of time, and provoked them to various responses, including the creation of counter-images of themselves. In his conclusion, Wolff, logically, suggests a project for a complementary volume:

My book is about the intellectuals of Western Europe, inventing Eastern Europe. As Miłosz suggests, the intellectuals of Eastern Europe have had to respond to the imposed images and formulas devised in western Europe. The intellectual history of that response would be another book, an account of the complex cultural strategies of resistance, appropriation, deference, complicity, and counterattack pursued in *the different lands* of Eastern Europe. (Wolff 1994, 373—my italics.)

As Wolff is fully aware, such a book could hardly be about any unified response from Eastern Europe, since that term never generated much feeling of belonging together in the region it aimed to designate. A book of that kind would, it seems, have to deal with the various historical and national versions of the imagined borderline between civilized West and barbaric East in Europe, and to face the intricate patterns of mutual images among the various Eastern European peoples. Not least it would have to take into account that the Russian empire, in the age of romanticism, so crucial for the formation of a new, national self-understanding, was a major European power, the master and oppressor of several nationalities in Eastern Europe as well as in Asia, whereas practically all the non-Russian Slavic nationalities, along with other ethnic minorities in Eastern Europe, were longing for independence from the empires they belonged to.

The history of the images of Eastern Europe, including the Eastern European responses, might, for these and more reasons, most conveniently be approached by breaking it down into the experiences of individual nations. Russia looks like a strong candidate for the dubious honor of being the land most consistently regarded as barbarous in essence by its western neighbors (including some of the neighbors that belonged, themselves, to the primitive East in the eyes of the westernmost observers). And Russia might also be the country where the foreign images eventually had the strongest impact on the nation's own intellectual history. That would be my working hypo-

thesis for an investigation into the historical formation of Russian national identity. After all, the ruling class of Russia in the eighteenth century widely accepted the view of Russia as a 'developing country', and of the Russians as backward Europeans struggling to catch up with the civilized West. And where else would one find an overriding cleavage of nineteenth-century intellectual life into two major camps named 'Westernizers' and 'Slavophiles' ? The case of Russia seems to offer a possibility for studying contrasting images of an Eastern European nation not only for a long, unbroken stretch of its history, but also with every probability that it is an important issue.

A history of the conflicting images of Russia should, in my view, not only include intellectual history, in the proper sense of the word, that is the views of the more articulate outsiders and insiders, but also the stock of stereotypes and commonplaces. Incidentally, one will come across these stereotypes also in intellectual discourses, and more often than one would expect, which is clearly one of the points that Wolff makes. But to identify stereotypes, one must have some systematic idea of what they are, which in turn implies attempting to compile a list of them, on the basis of the relevant sources. The widely accepted distinction between 'heterostereotypes' (how 'they' understand 'us') and 'autostereotypes' (how 'we' understand 'us') is most appropriate to this kind of investigation, and lists of stereotypes should include this distinction whenever possible.

As for heterostereotypes about the Russians, I have suggested a list of features, often repeated in a source material consisting of early Danish travelers' accounts (Ulfeldt, Juel, Æreboe, von Haven) and Danish geography text books, together ranging in time from about 1600 to about 1950. The stereotypes have been given the form of grammatically parallel statements about the Russians. The Russians are:

1. strong and have stamina
2. ignorant and backward
3. superstitious and religious in a superficial way
4. rude and unmannered
5. submissive and slave-like
6. corrupt and cheaters
7. unclean and evil-smelling
8. inclined to drink to excess.

Since the making of the list obviously implies the reduction of longer statements into the cited formulas, there is an inevitable element of arbitrariness in it. It might be both longer and shorter. But in any case it is bound to reflect the overwhelmingly negative or condescending attitude of the sources towards the Russians. Several of the items go back to the sort of things that have always been said about barbarians. One item is substantiated as early as in the *Primary Chronicle*, or the *Tale of Bygone Years*, when Vladimir Svjatoslavovič rejects Islam on the grounds that Russians like to drink. Is this an early autostereotype? Is there a self-ironic smile on the face of the medieval Russian author? I think not. The victim of the irony is the pre-Christian barbarian prince, viewed from the heights of the new Christian civilization.

Another early view from the outside of the barbarous, pre-Christian Russians is brought to us by the Arab diplomat Ibn Fadlān who had been sent from Baghdad on a mission to the Volga Bulgars in 922. There he came across some people from the nation of Rus, and his description takes the vivid form of an eyewitness account:

I saw Yar-Rūsīya [the Russians] when they had arrived with their goods at the river Atil [Volga]. I have never seen larger people; they are tall as palm trees, reddish in skin and red-headed. They do not wear kaftans, but the men wear a coarse mantle that they throw over one shoulder so that one arm remains free. Each man carries an axe, a knife and a sword. You never see them without these weapons [...]

They are the most filthy creatures God has made. They do not wash after having evacuated, nor after having pissed, nor after sexual intercourse. Indeed, they are like wild donkeys. They arrive from their country, anchor their ships in the Atil river, and erect big wooden houses on the shore. In such a house ten or twenty of them, a few more or a few less, live together. Each of them have a bench, on which he sits with his women, including the slaves that he has come to sell. And he has intercourse with his girl while his comrade is watching. It often happens that all of them are occupied with this, one in view of the other. A merchant may come in to buy a girl from him and find him having intercourse with her, and he will just keep on doing what he was doing, until he has reached his goal. (My translation from Thomsen 1919, 277f and Birkeland 1954,19.)

Barbarians are clearly very physical, very filthy, very beast-like, and have foul manners. The same basic characteristics were repeated about the Russians by Western travelers in the Early Modern Period, when Muscovy was 'discovered' in the course of European exploration and expansion, along with so many other unknown parts of the world.

The accounts of Russia by early modern travelers like Ulfeldt, Herberstein, Fletcher, Olearius, and scores of others,² did not, initially, give the Russians much cause for objections. The travel literature appeared in the West and circulated among Western readers, in tongues mainly inaccessible even to the best educated inhabitants of pre-Petrine Russia. The accounts did not present any practical challenge to the prevailing Russian self-understanding, but only served to shape Western understanding of the surrounding world. Correspondingly, the Russians had their own images of the foreigners. These were equally critical or even hostile, primarily on religious grounds, and remained equally unknown in the West, except when travelers recorded suspicious, unfriendly Russian reactions to their presence. There was hardly any formulated reciprocal awareness of the conflicting images, and certainly no sign of an intellectual Russian response. Not yet.

Peter the Great's europeanization of Russia was in itself an official admission of Russia's backwardness.³ It brought more contact with the West, including a rapid growth in the mastery of foreign tongues (especially French and German) among educated Russians. Along with many other eighteenth-century imports from Europe came Western views of Russia, and many educated Russians adapted them, as part of the reform process. But soon critical responses also appeared. Denis Fonvizin made Gallomania an object of ridicule and wrote scornful travel impressions of France and Italy. Catherine the Great, herself, wrote a polemical treatise against abbé Chappe d'Au-teroche, another critical French traveler to Russia.⁴

As for the foreign perceptions of Russia, they did not remain completely unaffected by the changes in Russia. An example of this is the preface by Ludvig Holberg, the foremost Danish-Norwegian writer of the Enlightenment, to the Danish traveler Peder von Haven's account of Russia. Von Haven visited Russia in 1736-39; the book, *Reise udi Rusland* [Travel inside Russia] appeared in Copenhagen in 1743, and Holberg praised the author for having described the modernized Russia. While older authors had described either the birth or the adolescence of the new Russia, von Haven showed what it had

² For a recent analysis based on numerous German accounts, see Harbsmeier 1997.

³ I make the usual reservation that certain aspects of Europeanization are evident before the reign of Peter.

⁴ It seems a bit surprising that Larry Wolff makes no mention of d'Auteroche.

grown up to be, said Holberg. Also von Haven, himself, was keen to stress that he was offering a new kind of account about a new kind of Russia. This, however, does not mean that he completely avoided the old stereotypes.⁵

Gradually the Russians developed a suspicion, not without reason, against Western writings about Russia. It has remained strong to the present day. Nineteenth-century Russian censorship included a special institution for 'foreign censorship' which remained in force even after the imperial decrees of 1905 and 1906 had granted 'freedom of the word' to the Russians. Throughout the Soviet period there was an equally acute sensitivity to foreign opinions about Russia. The long-standing concern with the critical Western eye may neatly be summed up in the question brought up by the narrator in Gogol's *Dead Souls*: 'And what will the foreigners say?'⁶ Still, the suspicion had its ups and downs. In the nineteenth-century it probably reached its peaks in connection with the Polish uprisings in 1830-31 and 1863 when the liberal opinion in many Western countries turned against Russia; further, in the revolutionary year of 1848, and during the Crimean War in 1854-56. Puškin's angry poem 'To those that slander Russia' (Клеветникам России), and also Zagoskin's historical novel *Roslavlev* (on the war in 1812), which abounds in criticism of French discourses on Russia and the Russians, belongs to the period of the first Polish uprising. Tjutčev's poems about the enigmatic essence of Russia which foreigners cannot grasp belong to the spiritual heritage of the Crimean war.

Russia's awakening to an awareness of her own unique features took place in the nineteenth century, from the period of romanticism and onwards. This is when the arsenal of national self-images and autostereotypes was most actively being created.⁷ I think it makes good sense to approach this process from the point of view that the Russian Romanticists were already up against a set of well-known foreign notions about Russianness. Influential new self-images were concocted as counter-images. In Gogol's *Dead Souls*, the author neu-

⁵ For more information on von Haven and other Danish eighteenth-century travelers to Russia, see Møller 1997a, 48-66.

⁶ Quoted from Møller 1997, 71.

⁷ For a comprehensive introduction to the 'symbolic world of Russianness', see Hellberg-Hirn 1998.

tralizes and transforms the foreign stereotypes by turning them into a laugh (cf Møller 1997).

One of the most popular Russian autostereotypes is that of the broadness of the Russian soul which, supposedly, reflects the Russian landscape. Elena Hellberg-Hirn describes it like this: 'we can speak of the imprint of the territory on the Russian culture, creating the national stereotype of the so-called *širokaja natura*, or *širokaja duša*, the vast and limitless Russian Soul. If territory is destiny, as the geographical determinists maintain, Russia provides a good example of this' (Hellberg-Hirn 1998, 26f). I am not much of a geographical determinist and find it more likely that the concept was 'invented' by the Romanticists. The classical reference is to the image of the troika at the end of Gogol's *Dead Souls*, though this is probably not the precise origin. In any case, the stereotype may serve to exemplify the Russians' striving to gain control over the images of Russianness, even to the extent of their becoming an export article. It won wide acceptance abroad in the nineteenth century. We find it, for instance, in the Danish literary critic Georg Brandes' influential *Indtryk fra Rusland* [Impressions from Russia] from 1888. Dostoevski), as we know, is another important 'exporter' of images and ideas of Russianness. But this much will have to suffice, as an outline of what I think is an important plot in the history of Russian culture: How the Russians gradually came to realize their inferior otherness in the eyes of the outsiders, and how they reacted to the bad news about themselves by struggling to create a new national identity, though they were never quite able to see themselves without the ingrained comparisons with the West.

Wolff ends his book by 'leaving the last word to Eastern Europe' and chooses Tolstoj to 'offer a counterblast' to the French *philosophes*. Tolstoj's counterblast consists of, firstly, his sarcastic portrayal, in *War and Peace*, of Napoleon, as the Emperor takes a view of Moscow and utters superficial French thoughts about it; and, secondly, a passage from the historiosophical epilogue to the novel, where Tolstoj speaks with heavy irony of modern history's regard for 'the welfare and civilization of humanity in general, by which is usually meant the peoples inhabiting a small north-western corner of a large continent' (Wolff 1994, 373f). This points clearly to the

likeable pathos underlying Wolff's investigation. But the intellectual history of East and West in Europe cannot be limited to an 'invention' made by the Enlightenment and to the Eastern European responses to that invention.

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