

Brad Gordon

Thesis Prospectus:

Imagining “Old Russia” in Paris:

Russian Émigrés and the Interaction of Two Cultures

The large flux of Russian emigration during the Russian Revolution, beginning immediately after the Russian Revolution and continuing well after the creation of the Soviet Union, presents several problems for those who study Russian history. First, those who emigrated were almost unanimously from the aristocracy or the intelligentsia. This fact is not surprising given what Lenin and his followers planned to do to these groups; namely, exterminate them from society. While the aristocracy represented a class enemy to the Bolsheviks, the intelligentsia represented a political threat, as they supported less radical parties and reforms. The artists who fled, including painters, novelists, poets, actors, as well as ballerinas offer a particularly captivating picture of this emigration. Because of the nature of their professions, there is a wealth of sources from which to gauge the social, political, and cultural currents of the émigré community. The majority of emigrants fled to France, Germany, and China.<sup>1</sup> My research will focus on those emigrants who fled to Paris. The rich history between the Russian and French states explains much of this emigration, particularly because France was the source of cultural and social norms for the Russian aristocracy and the 19<sup>th</sup> century intelligentsia. This dynamic was largely one sided, with France producing ever new philosophies and ideas, while the Russian aristocracy, and in their turn the Russian intelligentsia, soaked in all they could of these new aspects of French culture. Immediately before the mass

---

<sup>1</sup> I.V. Sabennikova, "Russkaia emigratsia kak sotsio-kul'turnyi fenomen," *Mir Rossii*, no. N3 (1997): 156.

emigration of Russians to Paris, France was deeply involved in the emerging artistic movement of modernism.

The first part of this thesis will focus on this historical relationship between the Russian elite and French culture, which will then lead into the more research-oriented portion. Focus will be given to the emigrants' drive to preserve the "Old Russia" and the nationalism entailed therein. Also examined will be the question of why some members of the émigré community chose to stay in Paris while some decided to return to Soviet Russia. Lastly, this research will look at the implications of this massive emigration, and in turn the myth of "Old Russia" that it created, on current cultural and political thought in Russia. Specifically, I will look at how the myth of "Old Russia," and thereby nationalism and the formation of a "Russian" identity, is similar to the nationalism found in current Russian dialogue. A variety of artistic professions will be examined, with a focus on novelists and poets, and a mixture of primary and secondary resources, including autobiographical works, will be used in tackling the aforementioned problems.

The research that I am undertaking aims to look at the role that Russian émigrés played in preserving the culture of so-called "Old Russia." I will look at the emigrant community in Paris, France because this group was one of the largest around the world. More importantly, however, I argue that the creation of the "myth of Old Russia" would be impossible without the émigré community in Paris precisely because the culture of "Old Russia" was so impregnated with French cultural values. I focus primarily on the artistic community of emigrants including novelist, poets, ballerinas, actors, as well as painters because I believe that this group of people in particular captures and preserves best the thoughts and feelings of "Old Russia" because these were the ones who tried to embody it in their everyday life and work. Writers and poets will

constitute the largest part of my research in part because many of the most well known émigrés, especially those who went to Paris, were authors. Writers, like the other members of the artistic émigré community, form part of the intelligentsia, a “class” that came to fruition in nineteenth century tsarist Russia. The Soviet intelligentsia differed considerably from the intelligentsia who fled after the Bolshevik revolution. The intellectuals who fled were “aristocratic in spirit, poor in means.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, they offer a clear picture of the culture and beliefs of “Old Russia,” and its aristocracy. In fact, many members of the intelligentsia were also from noble families.

Primary sources will constitute a large part of my research, as I will particularly focus on autobiographical works, memoirs, and letters from the artists themselves as well as their family members in order to see first hand the sentiments expressed by the emigrants in Paris. I believe that looking at their works in order to make connections between what they wrote or created as fiction, and that which was written in private or not hidden behind the veil of fiction is crucial to the myth-making process. I will consolidate recurring themes I find in these works in order to find the overarching archetypes of the émigré culture. I wish to focus on four primary writers of the emigrant community, two of which stayed abroad, and two of which returned to Soviet Russia. The two who stayed are Ivan Bunin and Nina Berberova. Bunin was a particularly important member of the émigré population, as he is one of the most well known and also the first Russian to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. Berberova is an important figure mainly for her extensive autobiography, as well as her commentary on other members of the Russian community in Paris. Aleksey Tolstoy and Marina Tsvetaeva both returned eventually to Soviet Russia, but whereas Tolstoy became a rather famous Soviet author, Tsvetaeva received a much less positive welcome and ended her own life shortly after returning to Russia.

---

<sup>2</sup> Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 67.

I will also look at film as a primary and authentic source, not only to examine thoughts and feelings of the early emigrant community, but, in addition, more modern film will serve to examine current thought on the issue. Ivan Mozzhukhin was a Russian silent film actor, who later led a very successful career in French cinema upon his arrival in Paris after the Russian Revolution. It seems that Mozzhukhin integrated and was welcomed into French society much more quickly than his literary counterparts. This fact suggests that certain artistic professions integrated into Parisian life more easily than others. Another example leads to the same conclusion. Mathilde Kschessinska was a ballerina who was purported to be the mistress of the future Tsar Nicholas II. She fled to Paris after the Revolution and managed to live a fairly comfortable life there, eventually opening her own ballet school. On a similar note, Natalya Goncharova and Alexander Benois were painters who went to Paris and while there were well known for their work on ballet sets. While it is too early to say definitively, it seems that writers and poets suffered the worst fate of all among the artistic community of Russian émigrés in Paris.

I plan to look into any interviews with members of the émigré community in Paris in order to look at how the emigrants expressed themselves publicly, if at all. Although it will not comprise the largest quantity of my research, I will look at government documents between Russia and France to highlight the political situation before and after the Bolshevik Revolution. The relationship between the people of France and the Russian emigrants, as well as French opinion on communism and the Bolsheviks will be key to understanding how emigrants adapted to Paris and French culture while away from their homeland. I argue that they adapted quite badly, which in turn contributed to a renewing of pride in Russian language and customs, thereby enhancing this myth that in “Old Russia” one found the purity of Russian culture.

My secondary sources will include contemporary research on members of the émigré community. I will also examine early and modern research on the literary and artistic theories of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Some of these theories include Modernism, Formalism, and Socialist Realism. I wish to highlight the importance of Romanticism and traditional Russian literature, embodied in the works of the greats such as Pushkin and Chekhov, on the writings and thoughts of Russian emigrants. Socialist Realism will be an important artistic current to examine because the members of the émigré community worked in direct opposition to its tenets. They saw this theory of art as a corruption of Russian culture. Fighting amongst Russian artists about which theory was correct and corresponded best to the “pure” Russian culture was often a heated debate and a serious cause of concern to the artists themselves. I will also conduct research on diaspora literature in general in order to see the effects this genre may have had on the works of the emigrants.

Theories of Nationalism and what constitutes a nation are also key aspects to understanding the myth-making process in Paris. Nationalism is a fairly recent phenomenon in World History and was beginning to reach a peak during the time of the Russian diaspora. Ernest Renan, a French philosopher active in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, gives a simple, yet profound, definition to what defines a nation that is not based on race, religion, or even language. Two things define a nation: “the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.”<sup>3</sup> Renan’s definition of what defines a nation does not give heed to physical boundaries, and therefore can still apply to the Russian emigrants who in theory were deprived of nationality by the Russian state after the Revolution. By building off

---

<sup>3</sup> Geoff Eley, Ronald Grigor Suny, and Ernest Renan, *Becoming National: A Reader: What is a Nation?*, (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc, 1996), 52.

of Renan's definition of nationalism, I intend for the reader to see it in a more traditional sense of the term rather than the contemporary negative understanding of nationalism. However, it will become clear that the understanding of the term is important in analyzing contemporary Russian sentiments. While many argue that Russians are nationalistic, a Russian would respond that he is simply "patriotic," which highlights the fact that the line between patriotism and nationalism, with its xenophobic tendencies, is very fine.

My first chapter will consist of a brief history of French-Russian relations. I will look particularly at the vast influence of French cultural and social norms on Russian aristocrats and the intelligentsia. This history will serve not only to set up the story of Russian emigration into France, but it will also help to explain many of the paradoxes inherent in the nationalism and what one might see as snobbery of the Russian aristocracy. While the emigrant community was proudly nationalistic of their Russian heritage, much of what they considered the culture of "Old Russia" was in fact borrowed from the French. This chapter will also give a brief overview of the phenomenon of Russian mass emigration from the Soviet Russia as a whole. I will look at emigration from 1917-1939 because by the beginning of The Great Patriotic War, "there were no longer any perspectives among the emigrants of returning to their homeland" by this time.<sup>4</sup>

In my second chapter, I will examine in more depth the culture of "Old Russia," or rather the culture among the aristocracy and intelligentsia before the Revolution. I will start off by examining the concepts of *byt* and *poshlost'* which are ideas deeply embedded in the literary tradition of Russia. *Byt* refers to the routine activities of life, those that seem insignificant. *Poshlost'* is closely tied to *byt* yet refers to that which is banal, or common. Later *poshlost'* came to take on a more sinister meaning, and was tied to ideas of sexual impurity and even

---

<sup>4</sup> I.V. Sabennikova, 156. "u bol'shinstva emigrantov uzhe ne ostavalos' perspektivy vozvrashcheniia na rodinu"

xenophobia. The desire to overcome *byt* and *poshlost'* became an obsession among the Russian intelligentsia, and theories on how to achieve this goal differ according to time and what literary theory to which one adhered.<sup>5</sup> I believe that the emigrants had a particular way of looking at these two concepts, which in turn helped in creating the myth of “Old Russia.”

After defining the main characteristics of “Old Russia,” the chapter will begin to examine how and why the emigrant community in Paris preserved and defended this culture. I will give particular focus on Ivan Bunin as he is often considered the leader of the Parisian émigré community. In this chapter, I will also argue that the fierce nationalism and desire to preserve Russian heritage found in the émigré community follows from its intense desire to return to ‘the Motherland,’ and that one should view Russian emigration after the Bolshevik revolution as an exile for many. Focus will also be given to the reception emigrants received while in Paris. Despite the long history between France and Russia, I argue that Russians were much more willing to adopt and accept anything French, than the French were to receive Russian emigrants into their homeland. However, and perhaps paradoxically, aristocratic Russians began to insist on using the Russian language while in France, whereas while in Russia French was often used as a primary language among the aristocracy. This paradox points to the mythical quality of “Old Russia.”

The third chapter will look at the differences between the émigrés who chose permanent “exile” and those who chose to return to Soviet Russia. I aim to answer the question of whether there were specific cultural, social, or political reasons that affected the decisions of emigrants to return or not. This chapter will also look at the fate of those emigrants who decided to return to Soviet Russia, particularly Tolstoy and Tsvetaeva. Some had happy endings, while others were

---

<sup>5</sup> Svetlana Boym, 41-56.

notably tragic. The role of the NKVD and later the KGB in persuading émigrés to return will also be briefly examined.

My final chapter will attempt to bridge the gap between history and actuality. Interest in the émigré community in Russia sparked immediately following the fall of Communism. Most notably, a 1992 film entitled “Rossiia, kotoruiu my poteriali” (The Russia We Lost) examines the lives of those who fled Russia. The film has noticeable nationalistic and anti-communist undertones. I will examine the similarities and differences between current Russian nationalism and the nationalism evoked by the emigrant community in Paris in the 20s and 30s. It can be said that one of Vladimir Putin’s main concerns in terms of domestic politics is the proliferation of Russian culture. I wish to tell whether this “culture” that Putin is promulgating is a culture similar to that of the Soviet Union or if it has any connection with “Old Russia.” If one is to give any credit to Ernest Renan and his view of what constitutes a nation, it might be found that Putin himself is in the process of myth making.

A quote which sums up fairly well what could be argued as the ultimate goal of the émigré community reads as follows: “We...[the emigrants] should carry Russia away from Russia and try to preserve it abroad until we return.”<sup>6</sup> But, what exactly, constituted this “Russia” that the emigrants were supposed to carry away and preserve. One could ask, amid the many paradoxes one finds in the culture and thought of “Old Russia,” whether this culture was truly Russian, or merely a Russian take on a variety of foreign imports, mainly French? Is “Old Russia” simply a myth, or is it a nation that perished at the hands of the Bolsheviks?

---

<sup>6</sup> Ivan Bunin, and Thomas Gaiton Marullo, *Ivan Bunin: From the Other Shore 1920-1933: A Portrait from Letters, Diaries, and Fiction*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), vii.



## Bibliography

Boym, Svetlana. *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Bunin, Ivan, and Thomas Gaiton Marullo. *Ivan Bunin: From the Other Shore 1920-1933: A Portrait from Letters, Diaries, and Fiction*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995.

Eley, Geoff, Ronald Grigor Suny, and Ernest Renan. *Becoming National: A Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc, 1996.

I.V. Sabennikova, "Russkaia emigratsia kak sotsio-kul'turnyi fenomen," *Mir Rossii*, no. N3 (1997): 155-184.