Exodus to the East: Eurasian discourse within the Russian culture of modernity

Introduction
Because of Russia’s peculiar threshold position between Europe and Asia, the question of national identity plays a very important role in Russian intellectual history, and one of the central problems in it is the relationship between Russia, the West and the East. Out of this configuration emerges the anti-western discourse of Russian exceptionalism and messianism, the historical indebtedness to the East combining with the formation and development of the Russian empire and nationalism.

Within this general framework the problem addressed in the proposed paper is how the idea of Russia as Eurasia, that Russia is neither Europe nor Asia but a joining of both, emerged and developed in a discourse articulated in texts and artifacts within Russian intellectual culture of modernity. This Eurasian discourse found its first articulation in philosophy and literature during Russia’s Silver Age at the beginning of the 20th century, continuing through the ideology of the Eurasian Movement of Russian émigré intellectuals in the 1920-1930s.

The main hypothesis and purposes
The main hypothesis of the paper is the following: Eurasian discourse emerged as a response to the intellectual and political crisis of Russian empire and represents an attempt to give this empire a new identity and legitimation, both before and after the revolution of 1917 as a geographical and cultural unity.

The purposes of this project are the following:
- To provide analytical readings and contextualization of several literary and political works, which though written in different periods, are all related to each other with the respect to the narration of alternative spatial and cultural representations of Russian empire.
- To make some generalizations about the spatial impulse in the construction of the Russian empire and national identity.

- To problematize the Eurasian discourse as a Russian form of Orientalism.

**Significance**

The proposed research has both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it is important to discuss the historical complex of modernity, Orientalism, and empire focusing on the Russian example. The project follows a major new direction in western historiography of Russia: a renewed interest in empire, the construction of imperial identity and imperial space, as well as the interrelationships between this categories and the culture of modernity. Here especially I have in view writings of R.G. Suny, G.Hosking, Y.Slezkine.

Practically, the results should be useful for understanding present-day revival of Eurasian discourse in post-communist and post-imperial Russia, intellectual debates on Russian national identity and its relationship to Europe.

**Methodological approach**

To analyse the concept of Eurasia within the Russian intellectual culture of modernity, I draw on the methodologies of humanistic contextualism, discursive analysis as it is practiced within the New Intellectual History (Carl E. Schorske, Martin Jay, Dominique LaCapra). This means not simply to study literary and political controversies itself but to examine the interaction of culture and politics, the historical, political and cultural factors that may have influenced the way in which the Eurasian theme was articulated and produced by cultural, political and scientific practices. A conceptual analysis would have to show how new meanings are invested into the geographical concept.
Theoretical framework

After the influential book Orientalism by E. Said it has been common to see Orientalism as a “western style of dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient”. Said is right in asserting the affiliation between literature, imaginative geography, empire and Orientalism but he might be wrong in designating it as a “closed system”, as a monological construct.

The limitation of Orientalism could be overcome in perspective of Yuri Lotman’s and Boris Uspensky’s semiotic theory of “binary models in the dynamics of Russian culture”. They stressed the duality of Russian culture as it was constructed in literary and political writings through the oppositions Russia/West, West/East, Europeanized/Asiatic. This dynamic model recognizes the equal role of both oppositions in the construction of Russian culture. They especially underline the role of “the way in which geographic space was experienced” in the process of defining Russian identity. This could be helpful for the analysis of the anxieties and hybrid forms of imperial representation, which I will examine in Russian intellectual culture. Thus it seems fruitful to combine Said’s theory of the discursive formation of Orientalism and the cultural-semiotic approach of the Tartu school.

In analysing Eurasian discourse I take my inspiration from the theories of modernity. These stress that spatial relations are crucial to its understanding; as Z. Bauman puts it, modern life is “dis-placed”, “in between in space”. Modernity is therefore a conceptual tool to analyze a history of Eurasian discourse. The principal authors are M. Foucault, M. Berman, D. Harvey, S. Kern.

Description of proposed project

The project consists of three parts:

1. The social historical context of Eurasian discourse

The crisis of social and cultural identity of the Russian intelligentsia at the beginning of the 20th century. As a reaction to this crisis of social ties and dislocation of cultural bonds emerge a
search for alternative identity constructs, a desire to incorporate the Asiatic “Other”. Turning
eastward was connected with the intelligentsia tradition of self-definition employing certain
spatial metaphors. The shift in narrative space (from cities to the steppe) was a manifestation of
specific crisis of urban individual.

2. The Turn to the East in the culture of Russian Silver Age

This part analyses various manifestations of the growing interest for the East in Russian
intellectual culture of modernity:

Increasing interest in Asia is evident in Russian literature at the beginning of the 20th
century, especially among the Symbolist authors.

The leading figure of this movement was Andrey Bely. After studying Buddhism, he
moved to an apocalyptic vision of the future of Russia, presented in the trilogy “East or West”.
The first part, “Silver Dove”, published in 1910, depicted the spiritual rebirth of one
Europeanized student among the Old Believers. These people practiced Eastern rites of self –
salvation. Bely found the resurrection of the world only in the union of West and East. In 1911
he published the second part of his trilogy, the novel “St.Petersburg”, where he presented a
picture of the capital of the empire during the revolution of 1905. The novel is full of Asian
symbols- a mysterious Persian, a Mongol face on the wall, the horsemen of Genghis-khan from
the steppe. The novel symbolically represented the conflict between the westernized city of
Peter the Great and chaotic, revolutionary “Asian masses”. The identification with Asia is
evident in the major characters of the novel, the Ableukhovs. A father and a son, an imperial
bureaucrat and an underground revolutionary, they both share a common Mongol origin and
Asian dreams.

The humiliated defeat from Japan 1905 provoked the poet Briusov to write
apocalyptically about “the coming Huns”. After the revolution 1917 this figure of eastern nomad
became a major identification for the radicalized Russian intellectuals. This found the best
expression in the poem of Alexander Blok “The Scythians” written in 1918 after the breakdown
of the peace negotiations at Brest-Litovsk. At this time he made a note in his diary: “The war is over. Peace is not yet signed” and added the words “Asia and Europe” which are the gist of the poem. Following his earlier verses “On the field of Kulikovo” and “Songs of Russia” he forcefully proclaimed the coming dangers facing Europe from the East and prophesied Russia’s “Asiatic mien”. He started this poem with the epigraph from Vladimir Soloviev:

“Panmongolism! The name, though savage, yet rings caressful in my ear” which pointedly indicates the continuation of line of thinking within the Russian intellectual culture in favor of her Asiatic destiny.

You are millions. We are hordes and hordes and hordes. Just try, fight us! Yes, we are Scythians! Yes, we are Asians, with slanting and greedy eyes!”

Interestingly enough this energetic verses provoked a kind of Eurasian identification both among young intellectuals in the exile and in Soviet Russia. Trubekoj in the letter to Jakobson (2,28/7 1921) wrote about the search of new way thinking which has been described by the term “Eurasianism”. “I feel this in the verses of M. Voloshin, A. Blok, S..Esenin” Immediately after the publication of this poem one of the leading Eurasian thinkers Petr Savitckij under the pen-name Petronik published a review in the Journal “Russkaya mysl”, in which he highly praised this poem as a literary manifestation of the growing Eurasian consciousness among the post-revolutionary intelligentsia. In the second collection of Eurasian essays “Na putyah. Utverzhdenie evraziytsev”, Berlin 1922 another Eurasian author Petr Suvchinskij published an article “The types of creation (in memory of Blok)” stressing the ability of Blok to feel and express the elemental forces in Russian life through the poetic symbol of galloping steppe mare. There is interesting evidence of Eurasian reading of the poem ‘Scythians” among young Soviet intellectuals just returning from the Civil war fronts. The famous Soviet writer Valentin Kataev wrote in his memoirs “The Grass of Oblivion” (1967)
about the feeling of both admiration and real sacred horror during the reading of Blok’s prophecy.

“All in this verses has been in accordance with my view of destiny of Russia at that time… I did not feared that “The gentle brow of Europe… Our Asiatic mugs will find you” and his “barbarian lyre” and all harsh words of this extraordinary Eurasian poem opening to me the whole world of awakening East did not grate upon me”.

3. The Eurasian movement: ideology and political practice

This part considers the discursive construction of Russia as Eurasia in the writings of Russian emigre intellectuals:

The Eurasian ideology found its first manifestation in one small book published in Sofia, Bulgaria in July 1921 and entitled “Exodus to the East. Forebodings and Events. An affirmation of the Eurasians”. The authors have been four young intellectuals exiled recently from Russia: Petr Savitskij, economical geographer, Nikolaj Trubetskoj, a linguist, Petr Suvchinskij, a musicologist and literary critic and Georgij Florovskij, a historian of philosophy. After the breakdown of Russian empire, chaos and tragedy of the revolution and civil war, humiliation of the defeat in the war and forced emigration, this group of intellectuals tried to reformulate the identity of Russia. The basis for it was the identification of Russia with Earasia. As it was stated in the introduction to this collection of articles: “Russians and those who belong to the peoples of “the Russian world” are neither European nor Asians. Merging with the native element of culture and life which surrounds us, we are not ashamed to declare ourselves Eurasians”. The Eurasians rejected the idea of Westerners that Russia has to emulate the West and proclaimed that Russia did not belong to the “Romano-Germanic world”. They ground the existence of the
distinctive “Eurasian world” not on ethnic or racial basis, but on the geographical and cultural one. Eurasia includes Slavic and Asian peoples “into the mental sphere of the culture of the Russian world”.

The driving force of this enterprise Savitskij published three articles which outline the program of the movement “A turn to the East”, “The migration of culture” and “Continent-Ocean. Russia and the world market”. For him the Russian political identity is defined by geography:

Russia is neither Europe nor Asia, but a closed world of Eurasia, “a continent in itself”. But on the other hand, he stressed the multireligious identity too: “Russia is truly an Orthodox-Moslem, Orthodox-Buddhist country”. In the article “Continent-Ocean” Savitskij developed the idea of the formative role of the oceanic trade for the successful economic development and the inclusion in the world economy. “Continentality” as the basic feature of the “politico-economic unit of the world, Russia-Eurasia” makes it “a unit primarily of self-sufficiency”. The major goal of coming Eurasian political elite is to comprehend this “continental nature” of Russia-Eurasia and to adopt the foreign policy to it.

The importance of convergence of different cultures in one geographical space makes another important aspect of Eurasianism. Trubetskoj in his article “The Upper and Lower Stories of Russian culture” rejected “Russia’s historical mission to unite Slavic peoples” and noted that “our “brothers” (if not in language or faith, then in blood, character, and culture) are not only the Slavs, but the Turanians, and that Russia has already consolidated a large part of the Turanian East under the aegis of its state system”. Trubeckoj particularly was opposed “egocentrity’ of Romano-Germanic intellectuals who identify western Europe with “humanity” and describe themselves as representatives of the “universal human culture”. This has been for Trubeckoj “a false nationalism” which is based on the “fraudulent terms” like “universal human civilization”, “cosmopolitism”, “internationalism”. An alternative Trubeckoj defined as the “true nationalism” as self-aware and self-sufficient nationalism “within a particular anthropo-
geographical area” of Eurasia. In Imperial Russia there has been a tendency to construct nationalism in accordance with Romano-Germanic model. He concluded that although true nationalism had never existed, “it must be created in the future”. He treated Eurasia as “broader cultural zone or grouping of cultures” which includes Slavs, the Ugro-Finnic and Turkic peoples of the Volga Bassin as well as Turko-mongolian peoples of the steppes. Florovskij brings the dominance of Romano-Germans on the global scale and formulated the dichotomy between “historical” which was playing a dominant role in world history and “non-historical peoples” which was remaining outside the world-historical process. Florovskij predicted that “the land of fathers”, of historical peoples or Western Europe will be succeeded by “the land of the children”, of non-historical peoples which he located in “the Far West” of America and in Russia. The same change of cultural map of the world predicted Savitskij in his article on “The migration of culture”. The cultural center of the world from Western Europe would “move to Russia-Eurasia and to North America” He argued that “the birth of a mighty cultural life in North America is a “revolutionary” fact of cultural evolution and “just as new a culture-geographical fact is the emergence on the broad culture-geographical arena of the regions of northeastern Europe and northern Asia integrated into Russian culture”. In this article he formulated his understanding of the term Eurasia. He claimed: “The name Eurasia expresses for us the link of the Russian element with some ethnically non-Russian elements of its surrounding milieu”. The cultural unity of Eurasian peoples has been established during “the process of culture-geographical and culture-ethnographic evolution”.

For him “images of geography and ethnography of culture are, at the same time, essential bearers of culture: of religion and philosophy, poetry and art, statehood and the economy, technology and the way of life”. Savitskij argued for the broadly interpretation of Russian culture which has to recognize “the participation in the matter of Russian culture by the Tatars and the Sarts, the Georgians and the Armenians, the Persians and the Turks”.
Eurasians ideologically justified the domination of Russia in the Eurasian world. The logic of this view suggested that because of the geographical and cultural-ethnic unity of the peoples of Eurasia separatism and self-determination have no sense. Trubeckoj particularly opposed the idea of self-determination. Later in his article “The Ukrainian Problem” (1927) he strongly criticized the idea of Ukrainian independence.

In the 1920s Eurasian have actively published collections of essays and propagated his views among the Russian emigration in Prague, Berlin, Paris. In the 1930s after the initial popularity the Eurasian movement lost its influence. Trying to summarize the legacy of this movement I can agree with the contemporary judgment of Boris Ishboldin: “Yet, the Eurasian doctrine deserves to be regarded as a rather important ”social myth” which might be become active at any time in our stormy epoch”. The correctness of this forecast we see now in the boom of Eurasian ideas in the post-Soviet world.

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