

Ilona Svetlikova

The Moscow Pythagoreans: Mathematics, Mysticism, and Anti-Semitism, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 184 pp.

This engaging little book is an interdisciplinary work on the intellectual history of the Moscow philosophical-mathematical school. The author is primarily interested in the thought of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century mathematician and philosopher Nikolai Bugaev, of his son Boris Bugaev – better known under his *nom de plume* Andrei Belyi –, of Nikolai Bugaev's student Pavel Nekrasov, and of other disciples of Bugaev, especially Vissarion Alekseev, the Baron Mikhail Taube, and Pavel Florensky. The book explores the views of these thinkers, all of whom were more or less closely associated with the Moscow Mathematical Society, on issues at the crossroads of mathematics, philosophy, literature, religion, and political ideology. Since he was the originator and pillar of the Moscow philosophico-mathematical circle, my critical comments will focus on Nikolai Bugaev.

In 1893, Bugaev published a paper entitled “Fundamental Principles of Evolutionary Monadology” (“Osnovnyja nachala jevoljucionnoj monadologii,” *Voprosy filosofii i psihologii*, book 2, 17, 1893, pp. 26–44). The implied reference to Leibniz's monadology (a theory according to which the world is composed of a multiplicity of fundamental units called ‘monads’) was intentional. In the introduction, Bugaev says that his “system is in some respect similar to Leibniz's monadology, or the monadology of pre-established harmony” (*Ibidem*, p. 26). According to Svetlikova, Bugaev's “Evolutionary Monadology” was “intended as a development of Leibniz' *Monadologie*” (p. 27). Bugaev, she explains, was fascinated by Leibniz's “universality” (p. 18) and “versatility” (p. 162). The “Evolutionary Monadology” is even written in the form of numbered propositions, which further gives the impression that Bugaev is mimicking Leibniz's *Monadologie*.

Moreover, according to Svetlikova, Bugaev was an anti-Semite, a pro-Aryan, and a Slavophile. Anti-Semitism was relatively commonplace at the beginning of the twentieth century and texts such as Sergey Nilus' propagandist forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (first published in Russian in 1903) added fuel to the fire. According to Svetlikova, the eighteenth-century discovery and translation of Indian texts brought a state of affairs such that many believed that European populations descended from an ethnic group identified as “Indo-Aryans” that lived in northern India and that constituted the Brahmanic cast. Houston Chamberlain's *Grundlagen des Neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (1899) and his *Arische Weltanschauung* (1905) – titles well-known by figures of the Moscow School – were in great part responsible for spreading the racial myth that the so-called Aryan was of Indian origin. On the author's account, Bugaev and many of

the other thinkers linked to the Moscow Mathematical Society at the beginning of the twentieth century adhered to such views.

Another closely related belief apparently common among the members of the Moscow School was that ancient Greek philosophy had been inspired by Indian thought. Svetlikova quotes, for instance, Emili Medtner – Belyi's friend and mentor – who says that “Greek philosophy was only under the influence of Indian philosophy, and not at all under that of Egyptian or, in general, Semitic thinking” (p. 147). This revisionistic view on the origins of mathematics was consolidated by the construction of what Svetlikova characterizes as “an imaginary Pythagorean tradition” (p. 8). Some people associated with the Moscow School claimed that Pythagoras had been “a disciple of the Indians” (p. 147). Probably under the influence of literature such as Leopold Schroeder's *Pythagoras und die Inder* (1884), they believed that Pythagoras travelled to India, from where he brought back his mathematical knowledge, and not from Egypt where Diogenes Laertius and Clement of Alexandria report that he went (pp. 28–32). Viktor Bobynin, who was a pupil of Bugaev, wrote in an encyclopedia article on mathematics that we “have some obscure evidence that some of the Greeks, namely Pythagoras and Democritus of Abdera, traveled to Hindustan to learn this wisdom” (p. 29). There was a general attempt to trace “the intellectual genealogy of the Moscow ‘School’ back to Aryan wisdom” (p. 32). Accordingly, Bugaev and his followers thought that mathematics had Brahmanic origins. And, since Bugaev conceived of mathematics as the backbone of European culture, he thought – by implication – that European culture as a whole had roots in India's upper priestly class, and thereby had Aryan origins.

In the wake of this *Zeitgeist*, Bugaev held the view that the Slavs are Aryan (p. 31). If Aryans are of Indian origin, and if the Slavs are Aryan, then it follows that the Slavs are of Indian origin. Now, Leibniz was of Sorbian origin, and Sorbians are a subgroup of Slavs. If the Slavs are Aryan, and if Leibniz was of Slavic origin, then – it was inferred – Leibniz's thought is typically Aryan. This view was in all appearances shared by the members of the Moscow philosophical-mathematical school. The author reports, for instance, that Alekseev promoted the notion that “the whole philosophical basis of contemporary culture was founded by Slavs: both Leibniz, who discovered the law of continuity, and the members of the Moscow ‘School’, who explored that of discontinuity, are introduced as manifestations of the Slavonic spirit” (p. 117). Mikhail Taube would have been “very keen to emphasize Slavonic origins of his philosophic and scientific authorities. Leibniz, due to his Sorbian roots, transformed in Taube's writings into the ‘glorious and great Slav’ Lübenic or Lübnitz” (p. 119). Svetlikova explains that “[f]ollowing Bugaev in his passion for Leibniz [...], Taube maintained that the very capacity of conceiving the idea of harmony was dependent

upon a particular frame of mind. A Jew was not capable of understanding harmony, because, a monist by nature, he failed to embrace the idea of trinity. A Westerner was no better, as the whole of his outlook, exemplified by Descartes, reposed on a dualism insufficient for harmony. [...] Leibniz, who formulated the theory of pre-established harmony, was an exception, but not a surprising one, recalling his Slavic origins" (p. 137). All of this suggests that Bugaev would have seen in Leibniz's monadology a prototypically "Aryan metaphysics" and that this is principally why he wanted to develop it further. Svetlikova concludes the section on Bugaev by saying that, "one is justified in considering Bugaev's attempt to rewrite Leibniz' *Monadologie* [...] to have been part of the history of the European nineteenth-century 'Aryan renaissance'" (p. 34).

Let us now turn to my critical remarks. First, according to the author Bugaev was partially influenced by Helena Blavatsky. About some of the propositions in the "Evolutionary Monadology," she says: "I suggest that the immediate source of these statements was Blavatsky. In her magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) Monad is one of the most frequent words, and the 'evolution of the Monads' (or 'Monadic evolution') one of the central subjects. [...] Bugaev was evidently trying to offer a metaphysical equivalent of the account of the 'Monadic evolution' expounded in *The Secret Doctrine*" (p. 33). Although such an influence is possible, and although there seems to be distinct similarities between Bugaev and Blavatsky, solid evidence for claiming direct lineage remains missing. Svetlikova explains that "[t]his is why Belyi wrote in his memoir that in his father's theory of the evolutionary monadology, Monads were not the same as those in Leibniz's *Monadologie*, and evolution was understood 'not in the style of Spencer'" (p. 33). But Belyi could have simply meant that his father had his own conception of monads and of evolution. In his memoirs, Belyi mentions many influences on his father – including Leibniz –, but he does not mention Blavatsky in this regard. In a paper entitled "N.V. Bugaev's Philosophical World-view" ("Filosofskoe mirovozzrenie N.V. Bugaeva," *Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii*, book 11, 72, 1904, pp. 172–195), Lev Lopatin, who was a personal acquaintance of Bugaev, says that the latter's monadology was a re-working of Leibniz's monadology and does not mention Blavatsky. So, although cross-fertilization from other monadological philosophies is quite possible, the author could have chosen a more cautious way of expressing her hypothesis.

Second, Svetlikova claims that Bugaev was "extremely anti-Semitic" (p. 95). But the material that she accumulates in this book to support her claim leaves room for doubt. As she says, "there seems to be no trace of it [i.e., of his anti-Semitism] in his published works" (p. 95). The claim rests on testimony from Belyi that the Jews were his father's *idée fixe*, secondhand allegations about notes from a "lost notebook" and another notebook in which Bugaev says noth-

ing explicitly hateful toward the Jews, Bugaev's nationalism, and his relationships with notorious anti-Semites (pp. 23–27). But, surely, one can be fascinated by the “Jewish question” without being an anti-Semite. The Christian Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov, for instance, was interested in Jewish mysticism and published about Jewish thought, the Jews in Russia, and other related topics without for that matter being anti-Semite. One can also take notes on various subjects including the Jews, be nationalist, and have relationships with anti-Semites without necessarily being oneself an anti-Semite. Insofar as we can tell, Bugaev's stance could have been closer to that of Solovyov, who claimed that he was just as far from Judeophobia as he was from Judeophilia (V. Solov'ëv, *Stat'i po evrejskomu voprosu*, Berlin, 1925, p. 48). Again, it seems like a mode of expression in terms of “probability” might have been more appropriate.

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