

Review - Russia and the Idea of Europe

Written by Maureen Perrie

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MAUREEN PERRIE, MAR 9 2017

Russia and the Idea of Europe: A Study in Identity and International Relations, Second Edition
by Iver B. Neumann
Abingdon: Routledge, 2017

In the Preface to this second edition of *Russia and the Idea of Europe*, Iver B. Neumann notes, with justifiable satisfaction, that in the first edition of the book (1996) he had predicted that the Russian state might soon start to move away from its liberal westernising position of the early 1990s, towards a more xenophobic nationalist position. The aim of the second edition, he adds, is to explain how his prediction came true.

In order to do so, Neumann updates his chronological coverage to early 2016, and situates the Putin period in the context of a cyclical pattern in which Russia's leaders have alternately looked towards and away from Europe. Perceptions of backwardness have led the state to turn to Europe as a model to copy, while subsequent backlashes against westernisation have created a nationalist resistance to change, which in turn perpetuates the kind of backwardness that is unacceptable for a great power. Russia under Putin is currently in a nationalistic phase; and Neumann predicts, on the basis of his analysis of Russian intellectual history, that the state's position will soon change in a westernising direction. The author's analysis is broadly convincing, and – while all predictions are of course inherently risky – Neumann's prophecy does indeed seem likely to come true.

Neumann's approach to intellectual history is that of discourse analysis, and it is therefore somewhat surprising that his two key terms, 'Russia' and 'Europe', are nowhere critically examined. He sometimes contrasts the concept of 'Europe' with that of 'the West', where the latter, especially from the mid-twentieth century, includes the United States; but he does not deconstruct Europe itself geographically, other than after the formation of the EEC in 1957. Even more surprisingly, in a work which claims to be, at least in part, a study of the development of Russian identity, 'Russia' itself is not explored. There is no discussion of the conventional distinction between ethnic and civic Russians (*russkie* versus *rossiiskie*), or between Russians as citizens of 'core' Russian territory and Russians as residents of the Empire, the Soviet Union, or post-Soviet space. Rather, Neumann identifies 'Russia' as the Russian state in its various manifestations, from the tsarist empire through the USSR to the Russian Federation. In his analysis, the Russian state chooses its position on Europe from a range of available representations in which Europe is 'the Other' in relation to which Russia defines its identity.

Neumann deals with his subject matter in strictly chronological order, with the main focus on the period following the Napoleonic Wars. The book is essentially a brisk canter through 200 years of Russian intellectual history, oriented towards attitudes to Europe. From the early nineteenth century onwards, the author identifies a whole spectrum of Russian positions on Europe, ranging from nationalist to westernising, and a number of variants of each of these: nationalism can, for example, be conservative, romantic, spiritual or xenophobic; while westernism may be constitutionalist or liberal.

It has to be said that the book is not an easy read. Neumann's style is very dense, and his discourse analysis is highly abstract and impersonal. The individuals who hold the views that the author discusses are presented simply as 'bearers' or 'vessels' of 'representations' or 'positions'. No biographical information is provided about these individuals, who are treated merely as names or labels attached to 'constitutive elements' of the debate (often they

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are only surnames, without the courtesy of first names or even initials). By contrast, the positions themselves are personified: they 'clash', 'vie' and 'struggle'. This may be a rigorous social scientific approach, but it does not make the work very accessible to a non-specialist reader. Another feature of Neumann's approach which readers may find disconcerting is the absence of any kind of authorial value-judgments on the views that he discusses: fascists and communists are treated even-handedly alongside liberals and democrats, simply as carriers of positions between which the pendulum of intellectual history swings. This too may be objective social science, but it contrasts sharply with the championing of liberal democratic values that characterises most Western writing about contemporary Russia.

A fairly novel feature of Neumann's interpretation is the dichotomy he creates between 'true' and 'false' Europe. He first introduces this distinction in relation to the doctrine of 'official nationality', propounded in 1833 by Count S.S. Uvarov, who identified three principles which distinguished Russia from Europe: autocracy, the Orthodox religion, and national sentiment (*narodnost*). Following the historian B.H. Sumner, Neumann suggests that conservative nationalists such as Uvarov did not reject Europe as such, but only the 'false Europe' that had emerged since the French revolution; Russia for its part, in their view, remained loyal to the 'true Europe' of the *anciens régimes*. Neumann continues to develop this distinction throughout the book, indicating that 'true' and 'false' Europe could have different significances for the bearers of different positions. For the Social Democrats of the early twentieth century, for example, the true Europe (of socialism) lay not in the past, but in the future; the Bolsheviks, in the Soviet period, represented Stalin's Russia itself as true Europe, in contrast to the false Europe of bourgeois capitalism and its Russian domestic lackeys. In the post-Soviet period, nationalists see contemporary Europe as false and decadent, while Russia represents the true Europe (of heterosexuality and patriarchy, amongst other values). In general, Neumann's distinction between true and false Europe works quite well as an analytical tool, but it does not leave much space for those Russian thinkers who have seen Russia not as Europe at all (nor even as Eurasia), but rather as something inherently unique and different.

As well as updating his chronological coverage of the post-Soviet period for the second edition of his book, Neumann has expanded his discussion of the Russian debate about Europe before the nineteenth century. He has added some information about Kievan Rus', and he touches on recent Western scholarly debates about the extent of Mongol influence on Muscovy, but his treatment of the crucial seventeenth and eighteenth centuries remains woefully thin. He acknowledges that the importance of Peter the Great's policies 'can hardly be overestimated' (p.14), yet he does not discuss contemporary opposition to Peter, on the (debatable) grounds that such criticisms did not appear in 'official political discourse' (p.14). Neumann's treatment of the seventeenth century is even more problematic: he makes a totally erroneous claim that 'The view that the West was a place from which one could learn lost ground' after the Time of Troubles of the early seventeenth century (p.13). In fact, following Russia's failures in the Smolensk War (1632-4), military reforms based on Western European models led to success in the war for Ukraine of 1654-67. More broadly, the reign of Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich (1645-76) saw a shift away from the traditional Muscovite paternalistic form of autocracy towards the more bureaucratised absolutism, which was developed further by Peter. It is a general weakness of Neumann's analysis that he fails adequately to distinguish between the 'organic' Muscovite political system, on the one hand, which so many later nationalists saw as distinctively Russian, and the eighteenth-century enlightened despotism, on the other, which they viewed as the imitation of a European institution.

Leaving these criticisms aside, Neumann's book provides a concise and well informed survey of Russian intellectual history over the last two centuries. The author provides a number of thoughtful and stimulating insights into Russians' perceptions of Europe; his explanation of the cyclical nature of the relationship is persuasive; and the prediction based upon it – of an imminent shift towards westernisation – is both highly plausible and (for those of us who still place a positive value-judgment on liberal democracy) extremely reassuring.

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Studies (CREES) at the University of Birmingham. She has published widely on Russian history from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, and is the editor and a co-author of the first volume of the three-volume *Cambridge History of Russia* (2006).