

Małgorzata Abassy

RUSSIAN MASON

ON THE PATHS OF HIS NATIVE CULTURE



A Russian Mason on the Paths of his Native Culture

The Case Study of Nicolas Novikov

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Kraków

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I believe in aristocracy... Not an aristocracy of power, based upon rank and influence, but an aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate and the plucky. Its members are to be found in all nations and classes, and all through the ages, and there is a secret understanding between them when they meet. They represent the true human tradition, the one permanent victory of our queer race over cruelty and chaos.

E. M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy*

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this monograph is to present the profile of Nicolas Novikov and his activity against a very rich and wide scope of Russian culture in the 18th century and its previous determinants.

Nicolas Novikov was a Russian subject and a Russian patriot. The reforms of Peter the Great, continued by Catherine the Great led to a far-reaching modification of traditional culture patterns based on the Orthodox faith and the community lifestyle which was its consequence. The reforms also resulted in the marginalisation of the former social elite – Orthodox priests. The Orthodox clergy turned out to be insufficient in terms of new challenges for new times – Russia's opening to Western Europe and the necessity to modernise the whole system of ruling the empire. Russian culture, whose main *spiritus movens* was the tsar, began to form an intermediate social class, the new intelligentsia, the one that would be able to deal with the task of adjusting the whole cultural system to the rhythm of the foreign civilization. Adjusting to that rhythm was not an option but a necessity. The industrial development of Western Europe which followed its mental revolution and the transformation of social relations did not leave much choice to the Russian rulers: they could modernise their country or be influenced by Western Europe. This modernization should be understood as a profound one: history has shown that it is not possible to adopt the latest technological developments and administrative solutions without a deep transformation of behavioural cultural patterns. This, in turn, leads to the changes pertaining to values –

both treated instrumentally and the autotelic ones. It also creates favourable conditions for the formation of groups that would form new values. Georgij Fiedotov noticed that “(...) with the help of the intelligentsia, Peter the Great managed to render the national Orthodox Church harmless and devoid of any influence for two centuries. He sharply juxtaposed it (the intelligentsia – M. A.) with the Orthodox Church and its priests.”¹ It was the so-called technical intelligentsia, engaged in modernising the political and administrative systems so that the empire could expand. In the centuries to follow, the intelligentsia, as a social group, was subject to an intellectual evolution. During the reign of Catherine the Great, the intelligentsia, to a great extent thanks to Masonic lodges, became independent and began to pose questions on man’s identity and the way Russian society could develop.² Since that time on we can talk about the phenomenon of the Russian intelligentsia defined not according to formal criteria, e.g. education, occupation, social class, income, etc., but according to the ethos formed by that class, based on its service to society, acting for the common good, protecting the weak and the harmed and speaking in the name of those who could not stand for their rights.

The activity of the Russian tsars could not be equated with weeding out old patterns and replacing them with new ones: both Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, about whom Jacek Kaczmarski, a contemporary Polish bard, wrote that “she keeps European philosophers on a lead, her army made Peter’s marble ceilings like concrete”, aimed at the syncretism of old and new

¹ Г. Федотов, *О святости, интеллигенции и большевизме*, Санкт-Петербург 1994, p. 8.

² Cf. M. Raeff, *Origins of the Intelligentsia. The Eighteenth-Century Nobility*, New York 1966; P. М. Байбутова, *Московские масоны эпохи просвещения. Русская интеллигенция XVIII века* (in:) *Русская интеллигенция. История и судьба*, Москва 1999.

patterns by using the potential of what had proven efficient in ruling the country and society in order to achieve, reaching the effectiveness efficiency and stability of their new solutions. All Russian thinkers, representatives of the new intelligentsia, and among them Nicolas Novikov, on whom the emphasis shall be put in this monograph, were following the paths of their national culture and trying to set up new patterns at the same time. Although Masonry was a transnational organisation, it does not change the fact that each of its members realised Masonic ideals in a predefined cultural, social and political context. This context determined the choice of tools and influenced the shape of new cultural patterns. Was it easy for the man who searched for the sense of life beyond traditional Russian culture i.e. the one based on the paradigm of the empire and the Orthodox Church, to follow the paths of his national culture? Not only did Novikov want to follow these paths but he also wanted to change them, appealing to the Masonic and Enlightenment ideas. The thinker linked his aspirations to realise his personal potential with his voluntary activities, taking into account all social layers: the peasantry, the clergy, the nobility of all classes and ranks, the bourgeoisie and the court elite.

The first chapter of this monograph deals with the patterns of Russian culture, its specific paths frequented by Nicolas Novikov. First of all, we shall take into account “the Empire pattern”, “the Orthodox Church pattern” and “the nobility pattern”, that is the values and, deriving from them, the norms of behaviour pertaining to the ruler and the ruling class, the Orthodox Church followers, and the nobility and their lifestyle. We shall show their mutual dependence and relations at the level of ruling the country. We shall also refer to some historical conditions of the cultural patterns in question.

The second chapter shall be devoted to Russian Masonry during the reign of Catherine the Great. This subject has already

Małgorzata Abassy's book is a useful and clever analysis in which an intellectual story of a Russian thinker becomes a material for a case study that strengthens a broader reflection about the transformation of seemingly unchangeable patterns of Russian culture.

*A fragment of a review written by
dr hab. Joachim Diec, prof. UJ*

Małgorzata Abassy displays profound knowledge of her research subject; she refers to numerous primary sources and she analyses extensively the tangle of the old and new patterns of culture in Nicolas Novikov's writings.

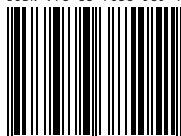
The Author is consistent in her description of the differences in the understanding of a citizen's freedom between the court and the intelligentsia; the contrast between the two world views: the imperial one and that of the Enlightenment.

*A fragment of a review written by
prof. dr hab. Jerzy Kąpiński*

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