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# Dmitrij Belkin, “Gäste, die bleiben”

Evert van der Zweerde

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## REFERENCES

Dmitrij BELKIN, "**Gäste, die bleiben**". **Vladimir Solov'ev, die Juden und die Deutschen**. Hamburg : Philo/Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 2008, 424 p.

- 1 Among specialists, there is no doubt that Vladimir Solov'ev (1853-1900) was one of the most important Russian, and hence European, thinkers. There also is no doubt that he was perceived as such, if not during his lifetime, then certainly in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today he is little known outside Russia or specialists' circles. The existence, during the larger part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of a regime that started with a Bolshevik seizure of power, euphemistically called "October Revolution" and ended with a crumbling "Soviet system" has had a number of deplorable side-effects. Among this "collateral damage" is the breaking-off of a flourishing philosophical culture and, as part of that, the discontinuation of the influence of a major Russian thinker like Solov'ev. In the fields of music, film, art or even literature, the 70-year Soviet episode did not block the international impact of what went on in Russia: 20<sup>th</sup> century global culture is hard to imagine without the names of Šostakovič, Ejzenštejn, Malevič or Mandel'stam. In the field of philosophy, by contrast, the influence of Russians has been much less obvious. One reason for this is that the new regime lay a much more direct and immediate claim on philosophy than on any other field of human intellectual or artistic activity – after all, it allegedly was Marxist philosophy in its only true interpretation that came to power in Russia.
- 2 The forced split of Russian philosophical culture after 1920 has deeply affected the reception history of Russian philosophical thought, both inside the USSR, where Russia's philosophical past became an object of ideological manipulation, and outside, where interest in things Russian often took an anti-Soviet colouring. It is, for example, striking how the intellectual biographies by Solov'ev's contemporaries, relatives, and immediate followers continue to dominate the scene. It is only since 1986 that this

situation can be repaired, and Belkin yields an important contribution to the creation of a more objective reception history. The book under review is an important corrective both of the hagiographic tendencies in Russian scholarship since perestroika and of general ignorance in the West.

- 3 There is a productive tension in Belkin's study between his attempt to map and analyze a specific part of the reception and influence history of Solov'ëv, and his attempt to assess the thinker himself. This tension comes to the fore in the author's explicit search 'for a balance between the static nature of the image of a "Prophet" and of the "greatest Russian philosopher" and the dynamics of the manifold images of Solov'ëv in the 20<sup>th</sup> century' (p. 16). With respect to such an endeavour, the question emerges what is to be proof of what. There exists a certain contrast between the aspiration 'to overcome the essentialist view, according to which there is a "real" Solov'ëv and numerous "Solov'ëv legends" by asking about recipients' actual interests and by trying to show how a particular student or a particular confessional or philosophical current tried to answer its own questions with the help of Solov'ëv' (p. 47), and his own claims concerning 'the real motivation of Solov'ëv's self,' which 'moved him to seek a synthesis of two "worlds",' (p. 27) and led him to combine mystical asceticism, academic philosophy, political activism, and a prophetic look on human history. Belkin articulates this, with reference to Hannah Arendt, in terms of *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* (p. 29). Although he is right, I think, to consider Solov'ëv as a metaphysical realist (though the qualification as a "metaphysical materialist" (p. 10) strikes as odd), it is also clear that his ideals of free theosophy, theocracy, and free theurgy were so distant from intellectual, sociopolitical, and artistic reality, that they were bound to lead to utopian and escapist interpretations on the one hand, and to more down-to-earth interpretations on the other, in which his ideals appeared, at best, as a kind of Kantian regulative ideas – as negative criteria of non-exclusion rather than as positive criteria of all-inclusion.
- 4 While I find Belkin's interpretation of Solov'ëv generally convincing, I doubt if it can be derived from the reception of his work, esp. if the latter is as varied and ideologically motivated as Belkin shows it to be. In such a case, it is the assessment of Solov'ëv as a thinker who tried to combine things that, for ordinary mortals, tend to be far apart, which *explains* the vicissitudes of the reception history, rather than the other way around. It is true that the 'polyphony and variety [*Buntheit*] of the figure and the ideas of Solov'ëv can be shown... through the dissonances between his recipients' (p. 389), but this is only possible if one already departs from the assumption of a "unity in plurality" of Solov'ëv's thought and action, i.e. that there is a *single* "metaphysical realist" (p. 19) behind the many faces (p. 23), and if one has already decided to overcome any dichotomy of a "daily", i.e. liberal and bright, and a "nightly", i.e. Solov'ëv (p. 22, p. 286, p. 385). Solov'ëv's unity of vision, his realism, and his "theurgic" orientation can be demonstrated on the basis of his writings and biography, which are sufficiently clear and accessible. For this, one does not need the reception history, even if it yields additional evidence.
- 5 Belkin limits himself to *two* major fields of reception: among Jews, both during his lifetime (his long-time friend Faivel Gec gets due attention) and in the German "language space" [*Sprachraum*], thus enabling him to include an important figure like the Czechoslovak president Thomas Masaryk. Large parts of the book read like a series of portraits of "receptors", accurately painted and mainly objective and neutral in tone.

Paradoxically, this makes the not too numerous places where Belkin gives his own interpretation or criticizes the interpretation of the authors that he discusses, stand out as almost part of a different discourse. In reading, I frequently forgot the overall interpretative framework of Belkin himself, which turns around the metaphor of guest and host. A nice metaphor, esp. in a case like Solov'ëv, a die-hard "guest" himself and at the same time an extremely generous person, both personally and intellectually. It also functions well with respect to the topic of anti-semitism and philo-semitism, one of the *files rouges* of the volume and, of course, a highly sensitive topic for both Jews and Christians. On the whole, however, the reception history narrated by Belkin could probably do without this metaphor – I at least could often forget about it.

- 6 From this perspective, I would be very much interested in an analysis, by Belkin, of "Solov'ëv himself", to match the present volume, as well as in a further exploration of the reception history beyond the two cases of "the Jews" and "the Germans". The cases selected by Belkin are certainly highly relevant ones, and they make one curious about a similar approach to Solov'ëv reception in Roman Catholic circles in France, Switzerland, or Italy, in the United Kingdom or in other Orthodox countries in the Balkans. Such studies will show in even further detail the very phenomenon against which Solov'ëv's philosophy of all-unity [*vseedinstvo*] was oriented: the increasing differentiation of discourses and disciplines, no longer held together by a unifying religious world-view, and, along with that, the "explosion" of the Solov'ëvian unity of thought, action (including "Christian politics"), and poetical activity (including art and mysticism) into a vast array of positions and trends, each of which develops some of the lines entailed in his system at the expense of many others.
- 7 This proves right, I think, one of Dmitrij Belkin's central theses, namely that Solov'ëv represented not so much the foundation and beginning, but rather the culmination point and the beginning of its end (p. 31, p. 389). One step further, we could ask ourselves whether the ubiquitous (including the back cover of this book) lamentation that "Solov'ëv is less well-known than he deserves" is not missing an important point: that his type of philosophical thought is, indeed, "history", and that however significant he is from a historical perspective, the attention he gets as a thinker in his own right is just about adequate. His "system" was not only the first on Russian soil, it also was the last on European soil, and it is not accidental that the attempt to incorporate his thought in an even grander system, Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy, remained outside the philosophical tradition. This becomes clear in Belkin's extensive discussion of two major cases. On the one hand, the assessment of Solov'ëv by the neo-Kantian sceptic Thomas Garrigue Masaryk, for whom the key to understanding his thought is the notion of *Selbstpolemik*: for Masaryk, Solov'ëv was a 'human being torn apart' [*zerrissener Mensch*] tried to reconcile the irreconcilable, e.g. knowledge and faith, i.e. gnosis and orthodoxy, and this also explains why his famous "mysticism" was in fact instrumental rather than genuine (p. 186f). On the other hand, there is the reception in the relatively closed circles of German (and Russian: Andrej Belyj) anthroposophists, who tried to grasp 'Solov'ëv's essence' and make him 'theirs' (p. 200f) and who produced the first German translation of his works (in 4 volumes), which was later to be criticized by Ludolf Müller and others for being not only highly selective, but also containing 'major translation mistakes [*kapitale Übersetzungsfehler*]' (p. 204).
- 8 Belkin's account of the Solov'ëv-reception in the areas he has selected strikes as very complete and almost encyclopaedic, including such easily overlooked figures as Max

Weber or Lou Andreas-Salomé. It is also very complete in the secondary sources it takes into account and in its historical detail (see footnote 621, for example).<sup>1</sup> It is a pity, from this perspective, that the book only has an index of names, not of subjects, and that the table of contents (p. 5) is very limited: a more systematic "table des matières" in the French tradition would have made the book, mostly made up of short sections with clear titles, even more valuable as a reference source. A combination of German *Gründlichkeit* and a pointed style that avoids elaborate constructions makes the book highly readable, too. Any scholar, who wants to work in this field of research, will have to consult this monograph.

- 9 Reception is not a passive process: it also means critical assessment and exploration of the possibilities contained in a philosopher's position. In the case of Solov'ëv and several of his contemporaries, this process could take place only partially, incompletely, mostly because of the partition of its "space" and of its politicization under "Soviet conditions". This may be a great loss for European civilization, but it cannot be undone, and attempts to revive the original context of reception, i.e. the flourishing philosophical culture of the Silver Age and of pre-World War I central Europe, are not only vain, but produce the opposite effect of what they intend: not a revival of philosophical thought, but its sanctification. What can be repaired, however, is the history of its reception itself. Here, the various lines can be connected and contrasted. It is at this point that Belkin, himself a Russian living in Germany, has written a study of immense value, in spite of the points of criticism given above. It may cover only a part of the reception history, but it sets an example in the way it does this.

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## NOTES

1. In a few places, it is even over-complete: footnote 551, for example, repeats the main text on p. 170.