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Review Essay

New and Old Works on Russian Freemasonry

Raffaella Faggionato

Douglas Smith, *Working the Rough Stone: Freemasonry and Society in Eighteenth-Century Russia*. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1999. 257 pp. ISBN 0-87580-246-X. \$38.00 (hardcover).

Georgii Vladimirovich Vernadskii, *Russkoe masonstvo v tsarstvovanie Ekateriny II*. 2nd ed. Series Russkoe masonstvo. Materialy i issledovaniia. Vypusk 1. St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo imeni N. I. Novikova, 1999. 567 pp. ISBN 5-87991-014-8.

Andrei Ivanovich Serkov, *Istoriia russkogo masonstva XIX veka*, vol. 1. Series Russkoe masonstvo. Materialy i issledovaniia. Vypusk 4. St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo imeni N. I. Novikova, 2000. 390 pp. ISBN 5-87991-017-2.

Andrei Ivanovich Serkov, *Istoriia russkogo masonstva. 1845–1945*, vol. 2. Series Russkoe masonstvo. Materialy i issledovaniia. Vypusk 2. St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo imeni N. I. Novikova, 1997. 477 pp. ISBN 5-87991-015-6.

Andrei Ivanovich Serkov, *Istoriia russkogo masonstva posle Vtoroi mirovoi voiny*, vol. 3. Series Russkoe masonstvo. Materialy i issledovaniia. Vypusk 3. St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo imeni N. I. Novikova, 1999. 443 pp. ISBN 5-87991-016-4.

Over the last few years, a number of labyrinthine works have been published on the history of Russian Freemasonry. Many are superficial accounts that talk in stereotypes and heap new legends onto old. Consequently, it is a real pleasure when serious studies on the topic appear. Douglas Smith's *Working the Rough Stone* and Andrei Serkov's extensive three-volume study *Istoriia russkogo masonstva* are two of the most comprehensive. The latter was published by the plucky Izdatel'stvo imeni N. I. Novikova of St. Petersburg in the series "Russian Masonry: Materials and Research," alongside a new edition of Vernadskii's

influential study on Russian Masonry during the time of Catherine the Great.¹ Vernadskii's work is a historiographical classic that deals with the initial spread of the Masonic Order in 18th-century Russia. The most important changes to the original edition are the accurate updating of the archive, bibliography, and commentary. These works stimulate a constructive debate about a part of modern culture that, three centuries after its foundation, is still surrounded by legend and suspicion. Russian Freemasonry remains a riddle that historians have been unable to unravel.

Despite their common subject matter, the methodology and approach of Smith and Serkov are diametrically opposed, and this radical difference makes for an enthralling comparison. The first author takes a sociological approach, and tends to select material and historical sources in order to bolster a rigid interpretation. The second immerses the reader in a mountain of material and sources, arranging them for his audience but supplying neither an interpretation, a set route, nor references to serve as guides through the maze of names, dates, lists of lodges, laws, and constitutions. Both approaches have their strengths and liabilities.



Not only does Smith's work take on Russian Freemasonry, it also attempts to encompass the whole of the civil society that Freemasonry helped build, and by extension Freemasonry's place as an expression of society and politics in 18th-century Europe. His investigation of the Masonic world is thus intended as a means of reconstructing the development of civil society and the public sphere in 18th-century Russia. The work's origin is summarized in the introduction: "In the lodges Russians acquired a new, Western standard of behavior. They learned to become civil and polite by curbing their base desires and passions, a process they called 'working the rough stone'" (5). The author is not so much interested in the nuts and bolts of the movement as in those aspects of it linking the newly-born Russian public sphere to the Western one.

The first part of the book gives a rich and detailed account of social life in late 18th-century Russia. It provides a thorough survey of the running of various associations, from the learned societies to the English Club and the Maritime Society, that helped "to forge bonds of community" and instill modern ways of thinking. Its main theme is that membership in a Masonic lodge was the equivalent of participating in "clubs, literary and scientific societies, salons, theaters." In Smith's opinion, the laws that governed the social dynamics and

¹ Originally published as Georgii Vladimirovich Vernadskii, *Russkoe masonstvo v tsarstvovanie Ekateriny II* (Petrograd: Uchenye zapiski istoriko-filologicheskogo fakul'teta Petrogradskogo Universiteta, 1917).

personal relationships of all these associations were the same. Different social ranks mingled without the restraints of etiquette, although class boundaries were clearly marked; there was a growing desire to participate, meet people, help with events and enjoy public entertainment, thus extending the pleasures of the highest ranks of society to a wider public. Interestingly, Smith observes how societies with recreational aims also introduced bylaws and regulations during this period. The Masonic lodges and societies both paid close attention to the public and private behavior of their members: “The club’s operations, and particularly the behavior of its members, were regulated through an elaborate set of bylaws that governed everything from electing members and officers to establishing the appropriate footwear to be worn during dances” (82).

Smith’s informative account depicts a rapidly changing society that charged through several stages to keep up with the times. His assessment of the Russian public is broad and articulate. If the Russian public initially formed part of the “well-ordered police state,” to use Marc Raeff’s famous definition,² the public that emerged in the second half of the 18th century, like its German counterparts, freed itself from state ties sufficiently to set up its own permanent community or group within society. It became a social body made up of spectators, listeners, and readers.

Smith highlights how Masonic attention to individual behavior typically satisfied the era’s need for new ethical models, which verged on becoming an obsession of the era: “Beginning with the publication of *The Honest Mirror of Youth*, in the reign of Peter the Great, the country’s reading public showed a pronounced appetite for didactic literature relating to manners and morals. Over the course of the eighteenth century, more and more men and women wanted to know what exactly constituted decorous comportment” (46). The pages of his book that analyze this aspect of Russian life are fascinating; the author links the centrality of this search for new ethical models to the rise of the absolutist state, the tenets of moral philosophy, and the discourse of civility. The “well-ordered police state” needed a new type of man, one characterized by a strong sense of self-control, moderation, obedience, and duty. Smith maintains that this is why Neostoicism was so important in Russia, as it provided the justification for the dramatic expansion of state power and the disciplining of society. “Freemasonry’s debt to Neostoicism is undeniable” (48). Thus, in Smith’s opinion, “Freemasonry was another expression of this search for a new system of morality [...] the discourse of Freemasonry became part of the more general discourse of civility or politeness with its attention to polishing man’s crude nature, to shaping him into something smooth, level, and even” (50). In a society that exhibited an atomized

² See Marc Raeff, *The Well-Ordered Police State: Social and Institutional Change through Law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600–1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

and fractured character and made social identity indeterminate and problematic, Freemasonry provided the consciousness of social identity, “helped unify Russia’s educated classes and created among them the sense of constituting a discrete social body, a public, separate from the gray masses” (6).

Smith’s work is well documented and contains an extensive bibliography not only on Russian Freemasonry, but also on Freemasonry as a whole, from its Scottish origins to its spread across the continent. It considers the most important interpretations of the movement, from Koselleck’s classic notion of the “dangerously utopian vision hatched by groups like the Freemasons” (15) to the most recent, such as the works of Margaret C. Jacob, who saw the Masonic lodges as workshops of modernity, “microscopic civil polities,” “in effect schools for constitutional government” (16).

The description of the structure of Russian lodges and their activities is based on the *Obshchie zakony* (General Laws), a Russian translation of the constitutions sent from Berlin when Russia was recognized as the Eighth Autonomous Province of the Order in Wilhelmsbad in 1782. The text gives a detailed account of the internal organization of the blue Masonic lodges, including the main duties, functions, election system, and strict code of behavior that bound its members. Any image of Russian Freemasonry based on these bylaws, however, is open to debate: the document represents Russian Freemasonry as a monolithic entity that merely reproduced models and organizational forms from the West, without the countless variations and divergences that actually existed. The *General Laws* used by the author reflect the structure of St. John’s Degrees lodges all over the world; they speak of theoretical adhesion, but say nothing about the actual way in which these laws and principles were applied in Russia. The same can be said about other official documents found by Smith in the Russian archives that detail all the regulations regarding behavior, ceremonies, and initiation rituals. This documentation is extremely interesting, as it illustrates the theory behind both the Western and Russian Masonic organizations. But it remains limited to the theory.

Smith’s first chapter provides an in-depth account of how the lodges were distributed around the country, their longevity, as well as the social and national composition of some of the most influential ones, such as the “Nine Muses” led by Ivan Perfil’evich Elagin. It becomes obvious how the composition of the lodge mirrored the “political core” of the country’s ruling class, which was joined by high-ranking army and naval officers, nobles, bureaucrats, merchants, and men of culture. In this way, Freemasonry reflected civil society, with its power systems, hierarchy, and an ethnic, linguistic, and cultural heterogeneity typical of a world undergoing accelerated change. From this point of view, the world of Russian Freemasonry was no different than the Western one. It absorbed all the

paradoxes and contradictions, the glaring conflicts between old and new, modernity and tradition, that characterized 18th-century Europe and the crisis of the *ancien régime*.

Smith's sociological approach is productive if one is looking to analyze the evolution of social forms. However, it only provides partial insight into Russian Freemasonry, dwelling briefly on the culture that set it apart from other associations. Smith attempts to rethink Freemasonry's place in 18th-century Russian society only after identifying it as belonging to a distinct and superior social body, composed of men of true virtue and enlightenment. But he does not investigate the particular traits that Russian Freemasons attributed to the concepts of virtue and enlightenment. He thus draws an indistinct picture in which the lodges are placed on the same level as the Mercantile Society or the Funeral Society. What the author does reveal is that these associations were driven by the same intention to discipline social life with rules and laws; but it is also true that their aims were very different. The Friendly Learned Society or the Typographical Company, founded by the Rosicrucians, have a radically different profile than, for example, the Society for the Translation of Foreign Books, despite the fact that they both aimed to spread enlightenment, or rather their own interpretation of it. In recent years, scholars have raised new questions about whether the Enlightenment can be seen as something that was everything and hence nothing, everywhere and hence nowhere. Much contemporary scholarship discusses "enlightenment" in order to assess the specific national features of a far-reaching and intricate cultural phenomenon. This discussion has also raised the controversial issue of the relationship between the Enlightenment and Masonry. Smith's opinion on this thorny topic is that if there was a relationship, it was one of similarity, not identity. In actual fact, not all Freemasons were "living the Enlightenment" (16).³

What should be added is that contemporary historiography also distinguishes between different Enlightenments, in order to highlight nuances and peculiarities that cannot fit within a universal concept. The same needs to be done when investigating the multi-faceted phenomenon of 18th-century Freemasonry, both in Russia and in the West, which was a huge cauldron of different and often contradictory values and ideas. There can be no doubt about the links between Freemasonry and democratic constitutionalism, on the one hand, and conservatism, on the other: this web of contrasting stimuli can only be understood by examining the various Masonic systems, or "observances," in which the

³ Smith's statement polemically refers to Margaret C. Jacob's *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

Brotherhood realizes itself.⁴ Each system had its own universe of values and behavior, a different way of relating to institutions, to civil society, to politics and to governments. Between the extremes of accepting the contemporary order and its values, and the hidden subversive impetus behind the utopianism of Bavaria's *Illuminati*, the range of choices open to Russian and European Freemasons was vast and filled with nuances. A sociological analysis of Russian Freemasonry that overlooks the history of the ideas will miss these distinctions. Another of Smith's main suppositions is that in Russia, where questions of identity and status were particularly acute, belonging to a Masonic lodge met educated society's need to distinguish itself from the common people. Freemasonry satisfied its members' vanity and desire for status, which, in Liah Greenfeld's opinion, had a crucial role in transforming the modern world and in the birth of the public sphere.⁵ "Being a Mason," Smith writes, "implied possessing something more, something better, that distinguished the Masons and their assemblies from these other people and places" (90).

Chapter 3 of the book revolves around this theory. It is conditioned by the belief that, along with a "loudly proclaimed love for humanity," Masonry harbored an "equally strong sentiment of superiority – occasionally even contempt – toward the rest of the world" (92). Smith defines this tendency as "the Masonic urge to classify." With its hierarchy, ranking system, and initiation rites, the Masonic Order could offer the cultured elite of late 18th-century Russia the role of a distinct and ethically superior class. This desire to separate also appeared within the Order: Smith maintains, for example, that joining the Rosicrucians was motivated by the need to distinguish oneself not only from the rest of society, but also from the other lower-ranking brothers, creating a restricted circle of the *crème de la crème*.

Embarking on this interpretation, Smith also explains the great fortune with which Russian Freemasonry was blessed. It was so widespread because its hierarchy was organized in exactly the same way as the typical society of the *ancien régime*, whose rigid system had been strengthened by the introduction of the Table of Ranks by Peter I. Masonry met the Russians' "passion" for hierarchy, stimulated by a mentality that saw *chin* as a sign of social prestige and source of self-esteem. Hence the lodges comprised an "upside-down world" which at the same

⁴ The term "system," or "observance" (*poslushanie*), refers to the various branches of the Masonic organization, each of which added its own regulations (*ustavy*) and rituals to the ancient *Constitutions* laid out in 1722 by James Anderson for the Great Lodge of London. Among the best known systems, the Strict Templar Observance was particularly widespread. See Giuseppe Giarrizzo, *Massoneria e illuminismo nell'Europa del Settecento* (Venice: Marsilio ed., 1994).

⁵ Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

time mirrored the structure of the very society from which they wanted to distance themselves, with its predilection for intricate and clearly demarcated hierarchies of rank. In the end, society was strengthened and had nothing to fear. This interpretation also covers the Masonic movement outside Russia and should be discussed further. The lodge was seen as a privileged symbolic space, free from the conventions and hierarchies of civil life; furthermore, the lack of social ties was regarded as a title of superiority. Smith reveals the paradoxical tension between the declaration of equality and brotherhood, laid out in the Masonic statutes, and the consistent need to distinguish oneself. It is a tension between the rejection of social hierarchies and the construction of a new internal system of rank, between the spread of culture and the demarcation of knowledge to which only a few elect had access. In Smith's opinion, these contradictions were the real face of an association torn by internal struggles and by the growth of new ranks and observances. But this was only one part of Russian Freemasonry. It does not suffice to explain the activity of Nikolai Ivanovich Novikov, Semen Ivanovich Gamaleia, Ivan Petrovich Turgenev, Aleksei Mikhailovich Kutuzov and many others, all key figures in 18th-century Russian Rosicrucianism. How does one reconcile the constant call for humility and self-renunciation that pepper their lodge speeches with this presumed need for personal distinction and superiority over the masses?

Smith's work opens with Novikov's arrest in 1792; the author returns to Novikov and his Muscovite Rosicrucian circle several times, highlighting its crucial role in the "increasing differentiation of tastes and interests."⁶ The public and public opinion in Russia appeared at roughly the same time as in the rest of Europe, despite the backwardness of Russian society, and the Typographical Company started by Novikov played a key role. "The works Novikov published with the Moscow University Press and the Typographical Company could be purchased in about twenty provincial book shops" (62). V. F. Liasov also gives a good deal of information that can be used alongside Smith's. During the 1780s, Moscow alone had 27 bookshops selling Novikov's publications.⁷ The public library at Gendrikov's house, the seat of the Rosicrucian circle, held 8,500 volumes that covered a whole range of subjects.⁸

⁶ Smith makes reference to the analysis of W. Gareth Jones, in whose opinion journals like Novikov's *Drone* explicitly sought to provide its body of readers a self-image, to give it a sense of corporate identity. See Jones, *N. I. Novikov, Enlightener of Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 31, 48.

⁷ V. F. Liasov, "Vozniknovenie rynka podpisnykh izdaniĭ v Rossii i knigorasprostranitel'naia deiatel'nost' Novikova," *Kniga*, no. 36 (1978), 73–80.

⁸ Ivan Fedorovich Martynov, Evgenii Beniaminovich Beshenkovskii, "Po sledam biblioteki Novikova," *V mire knig*, no. 3 (1976), 80–82.

This extraordinary man's emerging portrait as a promoter of culture jars with the thesis, maintained by Smith elsewhere in the book, that Novikov became a Freemason because "it offered him an outlet for his vanity" (112). Besides, the depiction of the entire movement as "a strange band of heretics" (162) that desired only exclusivity and separateness, contrasts with the Rosicrucians' laudable activity in spreading Masonic ideas and culture to the uninitiated.

Novikov's arrest is a crucial event, and Smith returns to it in his conclusion. The initial question goes unanswered: why was Novikov imprisoned, out of the thousands of Order members, and why was his group selected for repression? Smith observes that Russian and Western historians are still asking themselves this question, and it is this very episode that casts light on some intrinsic inconsistencies in Smith's approach.

According to the author, Masonry, with its clubs and other forms of social activity, was one of the first expressions of 18th-century Russian civil society; however, at the same time, "Novikov's arrest attests to the great fear of Freemasonry, that gripped Russian society" (7). Why then did the civil society that Freemasonry had helped to build, and of which the lodges were a mirror and product, expel it as if it were a frightening and dangerous foreign body? The author fails to raise the crucial question of what actually distinguished Novikov and his circle of Masons from the rest of the eclectic world of the lodges.

Clues left by the arrest of Novikov may suggest answers to this question. Because Russian Freemasonry was so multifaceted, the contrasts between the tendencies, ideas, and visions of the world of the different lodges, rather than their similarities and common features, need to be investigated. Because Smith does not deal with the theme of different currents, he concludes that "the various Masonic systems were not as different from each other as has generally been thought" (104). The various systems resembled one another in that they all "had higher grades which, along with the initial three Masonic degrees, were arranged in hierarchical fashion, and access to the supreme bodies of hierarchy was strongly limited to those of the highest degrees." This conclusion fails to consider the utopianism of the Rosicrucian movement, which played an important role in Russia.

The Russian Rosicrucian Freemasons directed their movement, both ethically and socially, against domination by *ancien régime* society and the individualism on which modern Western society was being built. Indifference to key social values and the prestige of rank and *chin* worried the authorities. The Rosicrucians matched the social hierarchy with one of spirit, awareness, and faith that did not overlook the basic equality of mankind. This led to a complete inversion of values and to the exaltation of humility (*smirenie*) as a fundamental ethical principle. It is therefore difficult to share Smith's opinion that Freemasonry

“meshed well with Russian social and cultural norms that emphasized the importance of obtaining ranks and that equated rank with status” or that its message “accorded well with the official ideology” (111–12). This may be valid for people who joined a particular Masonic system out of curiosity, for prestige, or for motives that had nothing to do with ethics. However, it was not the case for Rosicrucian Masons. They introduced radically new models of behavior and developed a reform plan similar to many utopian projects that pervaded European cultural life in the 17th and 18th centuries.⁹

Examining the Rosicrucian statutes sent to Moscow from Berlin, the author defines the Order as “extremely selective” and speaks of the Rosicrucian Degree as the “supreme status” within the Masonic movement. The reality of Russian Freemasonry, however, was somewhat different. The statement that Freemasonry erected divisions among brothers, cultivating differences, is contradicted by a number of documents that detail the mechanics of both the Eighth Province lodges and the Rosicrucian circles.¹⁰ Among brothers of St. John’s Masonry, the Theoretical Brothers, and Rosicrucians, there was no ascending ladder founded on prestige and privilege, nor was there an “inner wall that separated the Internal Order from the others” (122). The hierarchy of Masonic degrees included equality among members and respect for behavioral rules which could, to use a modern term, be classed as democratic. This is clearly confirmed by the Rosicrucian manuscripts mentioned by Smith. The laws governing the circles’ works reiterated that every decision was taken on the basis of a majority opinion, each choice was put to a vote, and the leader of each circle had to be a moral guide and not oppress his lower-ranking brothers. During the debates, “everyone could reason with his own forces and express his opinion.”¹¹ The need for secrecy is explained by the Order’s laws in these terms: “This secrecy, wisely prescribed for all the Order’s superiors, protects them from the danger of a criminal desire for honors and powers.”¹² The “inherent inequality among the degrees” (100) was not based on privilege but on the level of self-renunciation and self-perfection achieved. Finally, the assignment of Masonic offices was not a source of privileges: these offices were used as “facilities” by those who, further along the path of rebirth, had greater duties and responsibilities toward their brothers.

Smith speaks of “a pronounced disdain toward the non-Masonic milieu” among the Theoretical Brothers, a disdain towards the “*profans*,” the “vain men.” However, there is no evidence of this disdain in the original speeches held at

⁹ See Francis A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972).

¹⁰ Rossiiskaia Gosudarstvennaia Biblioteka (RGB), Otdel Rukopisei f. 14, d. 26; f. 147, d. 294, 299.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, f. 147, d. 294, ll. 17–27; d. 299, ll. 1–5.

¹² *Ibid.*, d. 295, l. 27.

these meetings. In actual fact, there is a continual invitation to put oneself at the service of one's neighbor, to renounce self-love (*samost'*, *samoliubie*), to combat pride (*gordost'*) and the diabolic temptation to feel superior. The initiation ceremony to the theoretical rank is important because the "prior" (*nastoiatel'*) would remove the boots of the new adept while saying, "with this act of mine, learn to recognize that Humility must reign between us."¹³ The central theme of Smith's book is contradicted by the dynamics of the Rosicrucian circles: *smirenje* and the renunciation of worldly values were to govern both internal relations and those with the outside world. The adoption of cryptic names also underlined this decision to renounce social prestige. An analysis of Russian Rosicrucian manuscripts reveals that the members of the Internal Order of Rosicrucians were motivated by the same spirit as a monastic community, with much the same religious content, ceremonies, and catechisms. The only difference was that the decision to join the Order involved staying "in the world," but even this decision reflected a notion of civic duty whose roots lay not in secular culture but in religion. The Russian Rosicrucians did not consider the lodge to be a haven or an exclusive place of virtue isolated from corrupt civilization. They saw it rather as the basis for change, which would come in the shape of initiatives that would spread ideas and reform human society.¹⁴

Smith correctly identifies a heartfelt sense of backwardness and a will to civilize themselves, both typical of the Russian intelligentsia, as some of the reasons for the success of 18th-century Russian Freemasonry. From this point of view, Freemasonry undoubtedly "offered Russians the opportunity to shed their Asian manners for those of the European, to smooth their barbaric coarseness into a civilized polish" (52). However, many Masons joined for other reasons. They wanted to retrace their past and their roots in the belief that they held an ancient wisdom. In Freemasonry they found "a similarity with the ceremonies and rituals of our Church" and rummaged through Orthodox monastery archives and libraries for "the texts of the Fathers of the Eastern Church capable of revealing to the eyes of every man how ancient Masonry is of worthy and venerable origins."¹⁵ Criticism of Western models was part of the desire to make these models their own. Assessing the Orthodox spiritual legacy was interwoven with the discovery of both ancient and modern Western philosophers: St. Augustine, Rousseau, and Voltaire as well as St. John Chrysostom, late Renaissance

¹³ Ibid., d. 100, ll. 3–8.

¹⁴ See my article "Rozenkreitserskii kruzhok Novikova: predlozhenie novogo eticheskogo ideala i obraza zhizni," *Novikov i russkoe masonstvo: Materialy konferentsii 17–20 maia 1994 goda – Kolonna* (Moscow: Biblioteka Rudomino, 1996), 38–50.

¹⁵ In Stepan Vasil'evich Eshevskii, *Sochineniia po russkoi istorii* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo M. i I. Sabashnikovoykh, 1900), 213.

alchemists, and the Philocaly.¹⁶ This fusion of different traditions is, in my opinion, the most original aspect of the Russian movement. Russian Masons became European by adapting their past and giving it a new lease on life.



Smith's sociological analysis stands in stark contrast to Serkov's approach, which sticks rigorously to hard fact and makes no concessions to interpretation and generalization. Serkov wants to provide the historical background which, he believes, is the basis for any discussion of social ideas, behaviors, and forms. The two authors' use of sources is also very different. Smith uses direct and indirect accounts to support his interpretation, while neglecting subjective aspects of the documents. His work is full of quotations that are not contextualized. I cite as an example Wegelin's *Pis'mo neizvestnogo litsa*, a defamatory pamphlet written by an estranged ex-Mason. Smith used the pamphlet in his conclusions about public opinion towards late 18th-century Freemasonry as a whole. By contrast, Serkov contextualizes every account and reveals even the subtlest bias. His work gives the impression that all the literature on the matter is strewn with false information.

Serkov's three volumes are in chronological order and deal with three periods in the history of Russian Freemasonry. The first tome contains information on the period between the time of Novikov's arrest (1792) and 1845. Volumes 2 and 3 reconstruct the events surrounding the main Russian lodges and their members from 1845 to 1945 and from World War II to the present day. These chronological divisions follow major turning points in the movement's history. In the first half of the 19th century, Russian Freemasonry was still linked to its 18th-century legacy. The year of Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin's initiation, 1845, is the date traditionally associated with the birth of the "new" Russian Masonry. Once it had permanently severed its ties with Novikov's Rosicrucian circle, it was mainly developed abroad by emigrating Russians. The second volume takes us up to 1945, which is the date that opens the next book. At the end of World War II, Russian lodges started up again in Paris, and this also marked the beginning of a new era in the Order's history. This period concluded with the movement's return to Russia under Gorbachev, and the creation of a national independent Masonic organization in 1996.

Serkov has used documentary sources from all the main Russian archives that have only recently been opened to experts. As Assistant Director of the Manuscript Division (*Zamestitel' direktora Otdela rukopisei*) at the Russian State Library in Moscow, he has had access to archives (such as the Kiselev records)¹⁷ that are closed to researchers owing to the absence of indexes and complete

¹⁶ This is a collection of quotations taken from the writings of the Fathers of the Eastern Church.

¹⁷ RGB f. 128.

catalogues. It may be hoped that his work will allow this material finally to be organized and made available to the public. Serkov also conducted research in the archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the Grand Lodge of France, and the Grand East of France, which allowed the author to further his investigation of the previously unstudied theme of Russian Masonry abroad.

In his pursuit of the essential facts, Serkov draws on both direct sources and official Masonic accounts. Accounts compiled by Order members are subjected to methodical and critical examination: they are compared with archival documents, corrected, integrated, and freed of exaggerations and bias. The author has also tracked down valuable data from published sources on lodges (newsletters, periodical publications, and journals) as well as internal documents (meeting records, acts, and yearbooks). He also brings in material on the history of the Russian liberal movement, imparting a sense of Freemasonry's political and social weight in the last two centuries.

The first volume recounts the main events in the life of the Russian lodges during the Napoleonic era and the Restoration. At this time, the lodges were busy accruing an extensive collection of ideas and texts left by 18th-century Rosicrucians. Once the manuscripts had been studied, copied, and circulated, they became the basis of new discussions and internal divisions. Once again, the Order experienced factional splits, which were complicated by its members' ties to various associations modeled organizationally on Freemasonry.¹⁸ The question of political commitment was crucial to Freemasons: some brothers believed that politics and religion should not be discussed in the lodge, in compliance with a traditional ban, while others held that a contribution to the reformation of society and the state was essential.

The belief that all intellectuals became Freemasons because it was fashionable is a stereotype, as Serkov's research confirms. He relies on lodge minutes and documentation as the basis for explicating the affiliations and roles played by eminent figures in cultural life at the beginning of the 19th century. In 1822, the lodges were driven underground by an imperial decree that rescinded the right of association. Serkov demonstrates that this did not mean the end for Masonic works. The lodges continued to meet and to study, collect, and distribute manuscripts. They continued to have internal debates, complicated by the increasing politicization of one branch of the Order that joined the Decembrist movement. Only after the 1825 uprising were the brothers repressed, forcing the majority into silence or emigration.

¹⁸ For example, the organizational model of the lodges was adopted by proto-Decembrist associations such as the Union of Salvation (*Soiuz Spaseniia*) and the Union of Welfare (*Soiuz Blagodenstviia*), and it was parodied by others, such as *Arzamas* or the Green Lamp (*Zelenaia Lampa*); many members of these associations were or had been Freemasons.

There is very little information on the history of Russian Freemasonry abroad during the 19th century, as Russian-only lodges did not exist, nor was there an independent Russian organization. These were years of heated debate over political questions. Russians living abroad felt the repercussions of the 1877 split between the Grand Lodge of London and the Grand East of France. This marked the birth of so-called “liberal Freemasonry,” dominated by figures such as Bakunin, Giuseppe Garibaldi, and Nikolai Ivanovich Sazonov. In his treatment of this phase, Serkov draws on personal memoirs, diaries, letters, and private documents, both published and unpublished, drawing on thorough research in the French Masonic archives. Serkov also gives an interesting account of the trials and tribulations of the archives during World War II. The period discussed in most depth, however, and the one most fascinating for non-expert readers, is the phase ushered in by the 1905 Manifesto granting the right of association in Russia. This marked the start of a decade of feverish organization: these were the years of “*dumskoe masonstvo*,” a politicized Freemasonry involved in the formation of the Radical Party of Democratic Reforms and in the Socialist Revolutionary Party. During these years, many Freemasons were involved in a wide range of journals and social activities. The Grand East of the Peoples of Russia was founded in 1913, the culmination of intense internal debate among Russian Freemasons. It was, however, a fleeting dream, destroyed first by the War and then by the Revolution, after which Russian Freemasonry returned to exile. In this period, important Russian lodges such as “Poliarnaia Zvezda” and “Svobodnaia Rossiia” were founded in Paris and recognized by the Grand East of France. Across all these changes, internal debate between the supporters of moral and educational matters and partisans of effective political action remained constant.

Serkov’s third volume recounts the essential features of the history of Russian lodges in Paris in the second half of the 20th century: the conflict between those who wanted to return to Russia and their adversaries, the role of the “Soviet patriots” movement, attempts at unity during the 1950s, the formation of “regular” Freemasonry,¹⁹ and the first steps that led to the rebirth of the Order on Russian soil. He analyzes the lodges “Astreia,” “Germes,” “Jupiter,” and others; the pages recounting the basic history of these events are punctuated by long lists of names and dates. This makes for heavy reading, but the information is invaluable for experts.

In his conclusion, the author justifies his decision not to give interpretations to the most burning contemporary questions: what is Masonry today, what role has it played in the 20th century, and is there any truth behind the “Masonic

¹⁹ The term “regular” refers to the segment of European Freemasonry that accepts the ancient Regulations of Freemasonry, whose fundamental principles were established by the United Great Lodge of England in 1929.

conspiracy”? In Serkov’s opinion there are no definite answers, given the backwardness of the studies on the matter and insufficient knowledge of the sources. However, what the author can and does do is demonstrate the unreliability of many documents produced by Russian and Soviet historians. Concerning Western historical and pseudo-historical works, Serkov’s harsh criticism of Nina Berberova’s 1986 work, *Liudi i lozhi*, is also worth mentioning; according to Serkov, it is a “journalistic *feuilleton*” devoid of any scholarly value. Berberova alleges that the Russian Freemasons abroad sought the continuation of World War I and thereby, perhaps unintentionally, facilitated the Bolshevik revolution. Later, they used all their influence to obtain recognition for the Soviet regime by the governments of Europe.²⁰ Serkov believes her guilty of “vulgar falsification” of the documents she researched at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and the Grand East of France. He maintains that she reconstructed the facts by peppering them with errors and lies, thus opening the way for an entire generation of “stories” about Freemasonry (2: 42–44).

Serkov’s work sweeps away the legends from this much-debated matter. He also separates baseless rumors from hard facts, without bridging the gaps in the sources with hypothetical reconstructions. The author distances himself from the patriotic current-affairs journalism of his peers, and takes pains to avoid scandal-mongering, propaganda, and popularization.

Indeed, Serkov warns the reader that his goal is not to write an exhaustive history of 20th-century Freemasonry. He simply wishes to lay out the “preparatory material” in order to make such a reconstruction possible. “This book is still not a definitive work, but merely a base for future works on the history of Freemasonry” (3: 402). Thus, when the discussion touches on facts and aspects previously unexplored by historical scholarship, critical analysis yields to the simple reproduction of unpublished documents.

Serkov’s investigation thus does not cover the lives of Russian Freemasons outside Freemasonry, nor does it probe their ideologies, political leanings, or social and cultural commitments. Because Serkov’s “preparatory material” does not pretend to give an overall picture, it does not reconstruct the ideological universe in which the lodges existed. Indeed, he leaves no room for generalizations: “In other words, I have not tried to express my ‘talents’ at generalization, but attempted to find my way around the processes behind Russian Freemasonry. Any declaration that claims to provide definitive assessments without knowing the facts would not be convincing” (3: 402).

Thus no concession is made to socio-cultural or philosophical aspects of Freemasonry. Instead, the reader is faced with a tough and, at times, arid reconstruction of facts, names, and dates. Serkov’s almost exasperating research,

²⁰ Nina Berberova, *Liudi i lozhi* (Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia, 1997), 38–69, 77–81.

which excludes all personal interpretation or subjective point of view, can be explained by the fact that Serkov has had to reckon with both the Soviet historical legacy, in which bias and concessions to ideology were standard practice, and post-Soviet works on Freemasonry. Recent studies, with which Serkov's monograph takes issue, at one moment deny the Masonic movement any historical significance and then attribute to it all types of villainy, conspiracy, and subversive plans.²¹

Nevertheless, Serkov's extreme methodological scrupulousness prompts the reader to search tirelessly between the lines and the long quotations for clues that might link the Freemasons to a single vision of the world or set of political beliefs. Serkov gives only a few hints about all this because, like his frequently-quoted source Osorgin, he is convinced that "the lodges are laboratories for understanding the world and not an arena for other activities."²² Serkov does connect the Russian lodges and Freemasons with the European environment in which they operated. The author always specifies the observance to which each lodge adhered, but fails to draw any conclusions from this. Nor does he explain if and when there were different concepts, or ways of interpreting Masonic work, behind the affiliation with the Grand East or the Grand Lodge of France. The author also makes fleeting, almost cryptic references to past traditions that 19th- and 20th-century Masons sought to revive. Yet the Masonic world was strongly oriented towards bringing back old traditions. It is no coincidence that in 1917 Iurii K. Terapiano called his lodge "Semen Gamaleia"; the choice was obvious.²³ Serkov only briefly mentions the rebirth of Martinism and Rosicrucianism in his chapter "Mysticism and Occultists," but he describes them as "para-masonic associations." He attributes the revival of the Martinist movement in 20th-century Russia to P. M. Kaznacheev, commenting that "he worked towards reviving the original spirit of Christianity and reconstructing the Novikovian lodges in Russia" (2: 73), but he then abandons the subject and returns to institutional and organizational themes.

The enormous amount of information on the lodges – their memberships, affiliations, divisions, and the rivalries between different observances – not only makes for difficult reading, but at times causes confusion. It becomes difficult to find one's way and isolate the ideas behind the protagonists' choices and motivations. Serkov occasionally hints, *en passant*, at "ideological dissent" (2: 83) that,

²¹ See, for example, Oleg Fedorovich Solov'ev, *Russkoe masonstvo, 1730–1917 gg.* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo MGOU, 1993).

²² M. A. Osorgin, *Severnye brat'ia* (Paris: n. d. [1949]), 16.

²³ Semen Gamaleia was one of the most important representatives of the mystic-religious current of 18th-century Russian Rosicrucianism. See my article "Un personaggio dimenticato del Settecento russo: Semen Ivanovich Gamaleia," *Rivista storica italiana* 102: 3 (1990), 935–71.

in the 19th and 20th centuries, reintroduced matters that have always been central to Masonic debate (discussions on superior degrees, the relationship between hermetic disciplines and social-political commitment, etc.), but he deliberately cuts such references short. Elaborating on them would intrude upon the history of ideas.



Serkov's work has a high scholarly value. At last, scholars have at their fingertips a huge amount of long-forgotten material from archives and private collections. Herein lies both the failure and the merit of the author's painstaking research. On the one hand, the specialized reader is faced with previously unknown documents and an array of invaluable information that has not yet undergone a subjective selection. On the other, without the aid of interpretation, the non-expert often risks drowning in this *mare magnum* of names and dates, or may even be repelled by the aridity of reports and minutes that the author includes without any comment. The abundance of biographical documents, diaries, letters, and first-hand accounts of major events provide priceless raw material for the specialist. But it will often prove indecipherable for the general reader who, on his or her own, will be unable to contextualize the references or pinpoint information.

Diametrically opposed approaches, different methods, and dissimilar use of sources have paradoxically produced similar results. The works by Smith and Serkov fail to account for the distinct cultural backgrounds of Russian and Western Freemasonry, nor do they explain what separates the two. Neither scholar investigates the differences among the factions and observances within the Masonic movement, so the reader is not equipped with sufficient tools to understand the motives and consequences of an individual's choice to join one system or observance instead of another; the causes of the countless internal divisions, controversies, and perpetual secessions seem inexplicable. Smith's interpretation of 18th-century Masonry is weakened by the fact that, as Serkov's monograph reveals, tendencies toward controversy and division were commonplace throughout the Order's history. A partial explanation can be reached, however, by first identifying the different paradigms and visions of the world that lay behind the organizational splits and controversies.

For three centuries, Freemasonry was an arena in which different philosophical, religious, and political positions would come face to face: it was an immense laboratory where new ideas and associations were experimented with and developed, a laboratory that encompassed all the intricacies and contradictions of modernity. Consequently, the study of Russian Freemasonry needs to focus not only on its similarities with other European systems, but also on the differences. How did Rosicrucianism, of all the different Masonic forms and systems, take

hold in Russia and dominate 18th- and early 19th-century Freemasonry with its hermetist disciplines, alchemic studies, mystical religiosity, moral severity, and an asceticism taken to the point of utter self-denial? In my opinion, this interesting question is raised but left unanswered by both Smith's and Serkov's works. Although Russian Freemasonry and its European counterpart undoubtedly have similarities and share common elements, it would be more interesting to examine the European phenomenon's interaction with a spiritual tradition and culture that has different roots. This interaction of past and present, and the dialectical relationship between religious traditions and ethical models, are the key to Russian Freemasonry's originality. By integrating the history of events with the history of ideas, we can develop a new approach to this complex aspect of Russian history at the dawn of modernity. Only by analyzing the contribution of Russian Freemasons to the history of culture can we find new answers to the many unresolved issues surrounding the Order and reinterpret the exceptional revival of Freemasonry in both the 19th and 20th centuries.²⁴

Apart from their interpretations of Freemasonry, the two contrasting approaches of Smith and Serkov raise another methodological problem, one which cannot be resolved here but with which it is appropriate to conclude this discussion. It involves two factors: the way in which the history of culture is written, and the use of archival material that has been made public after centuries of fear and censorship. How does one present the reader with information from sources in which the most recent accounts gradually overlap their predecessors, creating a series of indistinguishable "layers"? This difficulty, valid for any historical question, is made more acute by the nature of Freemasonry, with its inherent will to create a tradition that abolishes chronological order, blurring the boundary between real and ideal, history and legend, truth and myth. What relationship should historians today maintain with the reconstructions of the great historians of the past? Any attempt to rewrite the history of Russian Freemasonry means reckoning with fundamental historical works by authors such as Vernadskii, Eshevskii, Aleksandr Nikolaevich Pypin, and Iakov Lazarevich Barskov.²⁵

²⁴ As far as 18th-century West European Freemasonry is concerned, the works by Giarrizzo and Jacob (cited above in notes 3 and 4) contribute significantly to a new approach by integrating the history of events with the history of ideas. For an attempt at making the same connections in the context of 18th-century Russia, see my "Un'utopia rosacrociiana. Massoneria, rosacrocianesimo e illuminismo nella Russia settecentesca: il circolo di N. I. Novikov," *Archivio di storia della cultura* 10 (1997), 11–276. No study along these lines has yet been undertaken for the 19th and 20th centuries.

²⁵ Aleksandr Nikolaevich Pypin, *Masonstvo v Rossii: XVIII i pervaiia chetvert' XIX v.* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Vek," 1997); Iakov Lazarevich Barskov, *Perepiska moskovskikh masonov XVIII-go veka, 1780–1792* (Petrograd: Izd. Otdelenie russkago iazyka i slovesnosti Imperatorskoi akademii nauk, 1915).

In this context, the decision by the Izadel'stvo imeni N. I. Novikova to re-issue Vernadskii's work is particularly commendable. This new edition gives contemporary readers a mine of priceless information as well as an overall picture of 18th-century Russian Freemasonry whose clarity and articulation of material is unequalled. It is also a symbolic tribute to an exceptional scholar and to a method that has lost none of its bite. This method is founded on a rigorous use of sources, one which recognizes intrinsic limits on interpreting an era and its spirit. Yet it does provide an interpretation, one grounded in this history of ideas, which renders the divisions, rivalries, and evolution of Russian Freemasonry intelligible.

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