Centenary Symposium, Part I
Ayn Rand: Literary and Cultural Impact

The Russian Cultural Connection: Alexander Etkind on Ayn Rand

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Russia and America have often been viewed as polar opposites: tyranny, collectivism, stagnation versus freedom, individualism, and progress. And yet, there are many parallels between the two nations as well that sometimes seem to bind them in an odd kinship: both are giants; both are countries with a sense of unique destiny; both have been often regarded as barbarians by sophisticated Europe. For the past 100 years or even more, the two countries have been locked in what could be characterized as a love-hate relationship.

In the book *Tolkovaniye puteshestviy: Rossiya i Amerika v travelogakh i intertekstakh* ("The Interpretation of Travels: Russia and America in Travelogues and Intertexts"),[1] Russian literary scholar Alexander Etkind examines the complex history of the two countries' mutual perceptions of each other and the mutual influences between the two cultures over the past 200 years. Etkind looks at the response to Alexis de Tocqueville's famous *Democracy in America* from contemporary Russian intellectuals; the writings of nineteenth-century Russian utopians who saw America as a land of possibility; the ambivalent reports about the United States by Soviet writers in the 1920s; and the experiences of American "fellow travelers" who saw the Soviet Union as a workers' paradise. Other chapters explore literary influences and parallels. Among other things, Etkind intriguingly examines the likely role of William Bullitt, the first U.S. ambassador to the U.S.S.R., in inspiring parts of Mikhail Bulgakov's masterpiece, *The Master and Margarita*. He also offers an interesting comparative analysis of the work of the foremost Russian émigré writer, Vladimir Nabokov, and his contemporary Boris Pasternak, who stayed behind in the Soviet

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Union.

In another chapter, Etkind turns his attention to two refugees from totalitarian regimes who became prominent, although very different, figures in American intellectual and cultural life: Ayn Rand and Hannah Arendt. Albeit brief, the chapter—titled "Memory as Protest: Ayn Rand and Hannah Arendt," is one of the first analyses of Rand's work to appear in Russian literary criticism.

Starting with a capsule summary of Rand's early years in Russia as Alice Rosenbaum (she emigrated in 1926 at the age of 21), Etkind notes, "The personal conclusion she drew from the Soviet experience was a hatred of left-wing ideas, no matter what name they appear under" (2001, 282). He sees Rand's record of that experience in *We the Living*, and the heroine, Kira Argounova, as an "improved self-portrait" of Rand (283).

After a brief synopsis of the novel, Etkind notes that Kira remains sympathetic regardless of the "moral evaluation of her actions"—entering a sexual relationship with GPU agent Andrei Taganov in order to use his money to save her other lover, Leo Kovalensky (283).

> In a world of coercion, the norms that are common to situations involving free choice no longer apply. Kira's non-trivial actions are justified not by morality or law but by internal protest. . . . The reader sympathizes with Kira because he has access to her protesting consciousness. In unfree conditions, the only measure of morality is internal protest. Human morality presupposes freedom of choice. When there is no choice, there is no responsibility and therefore no morality. . . .
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> *We the Living* has been criticized as a Nietzschean novel in which Kira is a feminist Superman to whom everything is permitted, and who likewise falls in love with Andrei for his strength. Such a reading is unfair, since it misses the heroes' key weakness. Both Kira and Andrei are weaker than the Communists who are loathsome but aware of their group

> interest. Both submit out of weakness, and protest out of strength; but strength expressed in protest leads, in their specific circumstances, to inevitable defeat. Internal protest can justify the woman who sells her body and the man who sells his conscience. Rand's attempt to justify Kira is, in my view, one of the manifestations of the tragic thought of the last century, which tried to find the possibility of moral choice in the conditions of extreme violent coercion. (284–85)

While this conclusion is quite debatable—for one, it does not take into account the recurrence in Rand's work of the love-triangle motif of a woman and two men, even when the action does not take place under a totalitarian dictatorship—it certainly offers a fresh insight into the novel and a new perspective on the characters. Still, Etkind's analysis has other flaws and omissions. Somewhat incongruously, he compares Rand's portrayal of Taganov with Arendt's portrayal of Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, writing that "Rand finds a more complex dynamic in her fictional Taganov than Arendt in her real Eichmann. The Trotskyite [as Etkind, somewhat oddly, labels Taganov] chooses opposition to the regime. He passes judgment on himself, taking his own life instead of hiding from his surviving victims like Eichmann. Unlike Arendt, Rand retains for her hero the most important of human rights —the right to doubt, to repentance, and finally, to change" (285). The analogy between Rand's portrayal of a fictional and complex GPU agent and Arendt's portrayal of a real-life Nazi murderer—an ambiguous hero *versus* an anti-hero—is somewhat tenuous. Certainly, Rand denies her real villains (be it the loathsome party men and women in *We the Living* or the equally repulsive "moochers and looters" of *Atlas Shrugged*) the "right" to doubt, change, or repent. Disappointingly, Etkind misses another, more apt Arendt/Rand analogy: *We the Living*, in its portrayal of its communist villains, makes a compelling case for "the banality of evil." (One may recall the monologue of another one of the novel's doubting communists, Stepan Timoshenko, who laments that Soviet Russia is ruled not by

a fearsome monster but by a mass of cockroaches—Rand [1936] 1995, 346.)

Etkind also looks at two of Rand's other novels, *Anthem* and *Atlas Shrugged* (*The Fountainhead* is given only cursory mention) and briefly discusses her work as a philosopher and essayist.

The central idea of Etkind's chapter on Rand and Arendt, as the title suggest, is that both women's experience as survivors of totalitarian regimes shaped, in key ways, their work as authors and thinkers. Both, he concludes at the end,

> retained a lifelong interest in the political experience gained in a native country with a hated regime. . . . Rand and Arendt learned to feel the old pain in new conditions, using European memory to explain the American world. . . . Their voices, coming from another, more fortunate country and addressed to it, bring to us painful memories about their unfortunate homelands. Lucky refugees themselves, Rand and Arendt remained bound by the suffering they managed to escape. (Etkind 2001, 314–15)

Etkind notes that while *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* do not deal directly with Rand's former homeland, "the ideological lessons of the Russian revolution are evident throughout" (288). He sees her as driven by the determination to make sure that America does not go down the same path of collectivism and experience its disastrous consequences.

After a summary of John Galt's speech from *Atlas*, Etkind concludes:

> In this many-page speech, Alice Rosenbaum expressed everything she brought from Lenin's Russia to Roosevelt's America. This is undoubtedly the best formulation of Rand's philosophical and political position. This position is no less radical than the project of a general strike of business owners, and just as peculiarly responsive to the needs of the moment. Philosophers have often based their discourse on

> the needs of the oppressed, be it the poor, women, or homosexuals. In the world of the 1930s, capitalists became an oppressed minority, and their class interest found its voice in the writings of a Russian émigré woman. Thousands of honest people have been able to achieve a good life for themselves and their families by using their talents, and in the process have also created a uniquely diverse, stable, comfortable habitat for millions who have no such talent. The majority does not understand that, in infringing the rights of the successful minority, it undermines the source of its own prosperity. (311–12)

In keeping with his interpretation of Rand's work as rooted in her Russian/Soviet experience, Etkind explains her aversion to Platonism and its philosophical heirs as a result of an intellectual allergy developed in the philosophy classes she took at Petrograd University with the Neo-Platonist N. O. Lossky, who emigrated from Soviet Russia in 1922. In his words, "Lossky's former student firmly associated Neo-Platonist mysticism with the Soviet regime"—despite the fact that Neo-Platonist ideas were distinctly at odds with Soviet ideology (286). He adds that while Rand's "discovery" of "the connection between reason, selfishness and the common good" is not original, "her predecessors—Aristotle, Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill—did not have even one-hundredth of the experience of real-life utopian projects that mid-20th century writers and readers possessed" (290).

The attention to Rand's Russian roots and to Russian influences on her thoughts (which can be traced back, in American Rand scholarship, to Chris Matthew Sciabarra's 1995 book, *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical*) is a welcome corrective to the once-prevalent mythology of Rand as a self-made giant, an intellect shaped by its own power and not by the influences of her environment. Yet Etkind's thesis is overly reductionist, and his analysis misses some interesting complexities. For one, he does not acknowledge that Rand's absolute rejection of communism went hand-in-hand with a rejection of the conservative values of pre-revolutionary Tsarist

Russia.

Indeed, Rand's philosophy can hardly be seen as a knee-jerk rejection of, and rebellion against, all things Soviet. Her commitment to individualism and capitalism can certainly be seen in that light, but other important elements of her world-view—the hostility to religion and mysticism, the exalted view of Man, the romanticization of the human conquest of nature and her cult of heavy industry, particularly steel—are startlingly in tune with the Soviet mindset. This is not to say that these elements of Rand's philosophy were borrowed from her Soviet environment as a young woman; but clearly, she did not become intellectually allergic to everything she could have associated with the Soviet regime.

Etkind does, however, assert that Rand's thinking mirrored, in some important ways, the mentality of the Soviet regime she left behind. He notes that, like the Soviets, she was prone to seeking scapegoats: what the bourgeoisie was to the Bolsheviks, mainstream intellectuals were to Rand. He also suggests that in *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand's ideas and characters

> come full circle: She seeks deliverance from her early experience in Russia and a guarantee that it will not be repeated in America. Yet she constructs enemies with a temperament and a dedication that are far more akin to the style of the Soviet land of her birth. Toward the end, as a means of deliverance and a prescription, Rand urges America's businessmen to carry out a general strike which bears a strong resemblance to the events in Russia in 1905, the time and place of her birth. (313)

The analogy to the general strike in Russia in 1905, driven primarily by demands for various liberal political reforms, is quite interesting—though it's doubtful that Rand was consciously or unconsciously seeking such a parallel. On the other hand, while the argument that Rand's attitude toward her villains has something in common with the Soviet demonization of "the class enemy" may strike Rand's admirers as outrageous, I believe that Etkind puts his

finger on a troubling aspect of Rand's thinking—her intolerance. The fact that Rand's inner circle of followers, ostensibly dedicated the ideals of liberty and individualism, became something of a Communist-style party cell complete with its own purges can be seen as an ironic testament to this fact (something that Etkind does not mention, though he provides some sketchy biographical information on Rand).

Etkind notes another aspect of Rand's paradoxical kinship with the hated regime she left behind: just like in the Socialist Realist novel of the Soviet heyday, the hero overcomes all obstacles and resists all temptation, and the good guys are uniformly good-looking and noble while the bad guys are ugly and vile. Here again, there is a regrettable omission: Etkind never mentions Rand's openly articulated principle that art should reflect life "as it might be and ought to be" (Rand 1975, 80), which echoes the Socialist Realist credo of showing reality as it should be.

Yet Etkind's ultimate assessment is surprisingly positive:

> This is an aesthetic of mass culture similar to socialist realism in form, but its opposite in content. Capitalist realism has much more vitality. In capitalist conditions, mass production does not depersonalize the product and mass consumption does not deprive it of spiritual value, because the producer and the consumer exercise free choice. The essence of this system—which, according to Rand, is not only the most efficient but the most moral—is freedom. A philosopher and a practitioner of capitalism, Rand was able to achieve her goal: to create a successful consumer product, which sustains mass production without losing its human value.[2] (2001, 314)

Etkind's chapter also includes a respectful though uneven discussion of Rand's real-life influence. He has little to say about her general contribution to turning the tide of public opinion against big government; however, he makes the odd claim that "Hillary Clinton has sometimes cited her as a role model" (287); in fact, Hillary

Clinton had a brief interest in Rand as a student at Wellesley. He is especially impressed by the fact that her former disciple Alan Greenspan has headed the Federal Reserve since 1987, largely crediting him with America's turn-of-the century economic growth, and even sees this as proof that Rand's capitalist radicalism was not utopian (even though Greenspan's policies arguably have little in common with Rand's laissez-faire ideas).

"21st century Russia, which is going through the painful school of capitalism, is entitled to take patriotic pride in the fact that the most successful American financier of the 20th century took the same lessons from a St. Petersburg native," writes Etkind. He adds that "along with Vladimir Nabokov and Joseph Brodsky, Ayn Rand is the third—chronologically the first—example of a highly successful Russian author who wrote in English" (287). Rand would have probably winced at these statements; after leaving Russia, she never saw herself as Russian and rather decisively repudiated her land of birth.

Nonetheless, in an age when her books are finally being read in Russia, an essay by a former compatriot analyzing her as a writer and thinker with a Russian background is valuable and interesting, whether or not one agrees with the analysis. One can hope that Etkind's essay is only the beginning of Rand studies in Russia.

Notes

1. I have translated into English all of the passages from the original Russian text.

2. Comparisons between Rand's approach and Socialist Realism have also been made by Sciabarra 1995, 208; Johnson 2000, 54–55; Bell-Villada 2001, 186; and Saint-Andre 2003, 300.

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