

Review / Обзорная статья

In Search of Russian Identity: Philosophical Themes in the Works of V.N. Belov

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Abstract. In recent years, increasing attention has been devoted to the issue of Russian identity. In this context, there is a growing need for a detailed exploration of the phenomenon of Russian identity under contemporary conditions. This article examines Russian philosophy as a key factor shaping Russia's national identity. Special emphasis is placed on the works of Professor Vladimir Nikolaevich Belov, a leading scholar in the history of Russian philosophy.

Keywords: Russian philosophy, Russia, national identity, history of Russian philosophy, Russian Neo-Kantianism, German Neo-Kantianism, V.N. Belov, V.E. Sesemann, B.V. Yakovenko, specificity of Russian Neo-Kantianism

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Introduction

Vladimir Nikolaevich Belov is a well-known Russian philosopher whose works are devoted to the study of the history of Russian philosophical thought, its foundations and distinctive features, as well as its place within the global historical-philosophical process. His scholarly research covers a wide range of issues related to the emergence and development of Russian philosophy — from the period of Ancient Rus' to the present day.

His academic interests are extensive and include the history of Russian philosophy, philosophy of culture, religious philosophy, and Neo-Kantianism. He is the author of more than 500 scholarly works. Professor Belov is considered the leading Russian specialist on the history of the Marburg School of Neo-Kantianism. In his studies of Neo-Kantianism, he consistently argues that the development of this movement at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was not a dead-end stage in the evolution of Kant's transcendental criticism, but rather gave both the European and Russian philosophical traditions a powerful creative impulse. In essence, it became the starting point for many contemporary philosophical schools and currents. In particular, Neo-Kantianism influenced the formation of the philosophy of culture, which subsequently acquired independent disciplinary status, as well as the philosophy of dialogue — unthinkable without the philosophical inquiries of Hermann Cohen.

In 2002, V.N. Belov organized in Saratov the first international conference in Russia dedicated to the philosophy of Hermann Cohen. He also produced the first Russian translation of one of the foundational works of the founder of the Marburg School, Kant's Theory of Experience (Kants Theorie der Erfahrung),

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a publication supported by a grant from the Goethe-Institut. Belov served as the Russian coordinator (with Professor A. Poma representing the Italian side) of an international academic exchange project between the universities of Saratov and Turin titled “German and Russian Neo-Kantianism” (2003–2008), involving students, postgraduate researchers, and faculty members.

Materials and Methods

The empirical basis for this study consists of monographs, scholarly articles, and published lecture courses by Professor V.N. Belov, which collectively reflect a broad range of issues in Russian philosophy, Neo-Kantianism, and the problem of national identity.

Methodologically, the study is grounded in a comprehensive approach that includes historical-philosophical analysis, comparative methodology, and a hermeneutic framework. The conducted analysis made it possible to identify the key directions and arguments presented in the works of V.N. Belov concerning the issue of Russian identity and to formulate the principal conclusions relevant to this topic.

Results and Discussion

The monograph by V.N. Belov, *Essays on the History of Russian Philosophy*, opens with a question that is, on the one hand, seemingly simple, yet on the other profoundly complex: What is philosophy? In what ways does it differ from German, Chinese, or English philosophical traditions? If we consider the division of philosophy according to a historical and geographical principle, scholars typically distinguish between Eastern and Western traditions. The Eastern tradition is characterized by an evolutionary trajectory of development without abrupt paradigm shifts, unlike the Western tradition. Moreover, Eastern philosophy lacks such systematic components as ontology, epistemology, logic, ethics, and aesthetics; instead, it is focused primarily on the study of the inner world of the human being.

The Russian philosophical tradition — if viewed geographically — occupies an intermediate position and embodies features of both East and West. Many Russian philosophers, among whom Vladimir Solovyov holds a prominent place, regarded the unification of Eastern and Western ideas as the foundational principle of Russian philosophy. However, Carl Jung, the well-known philosopher and psychologist, believed that such a synthesis was impossible, arguing that Russian philosophy was still too young and not yet capable of fully realizing this synthesis.

Another thinker, Andrei Bely, held a different view concerning the cultural-philosophical space of Russia, seeing it as an arena of constant struggle between spontaneity and rationality. He argued that in the soul of the Russian people, Eastern spontaneity and European civility are in perpetual conflict. This internal tension gives rise to crises and strains that manifest themselves in literature, art, and public life. Instead of a mechanical synthesis of East and West, Bely proposed a profound internal transformation of consciousness that would lead to genuine unity and the harmonization of opposing principles.

Professor Belov, addressing this question, proposes a more effective approach:

We would venture to express what seems to us a more productive and realistic — though thus far insufficiently justified — idea: that Russian philosophy, while Western in its essence, may serve as a bridge to Eastern wisdom [1, p. 6].

The question of the national differentiation of philosophy represents a highly complex field of inquiry. It is important to recognize that any national philosophical tradition implicitly contains both external and internal borrowings. What is of primary significance here is not merely the existence of these borrowings, but the conditions under which they were adopted and the ways in which they influenced the subsequent development of culture, science, and society.

If we examine the historical roots that exerted decisive influence on the formation of the Russian philosophical tradition, it is essential — following Professor Belov — to highlight the following:

In the process of the genesis of Russian philosophical thought, two sources come into contact: paganism (the internal source) and Byzantine Christianity (the external source). Their interaction is characterized by mutual complementarity, though not without contradictions and confrontation. As a result of this encounter, the Orthodox variant of Christianity emerges, which in its mystical-ascetic tradition would later, at more advanced stages of philosophical development, confront the external influence of Western philosophy and theology in a more conflict-laden form [1, pp. 18–19].

Indeed, without attention to this historical fact, further research on Russian identity would be impossible.

In *Essays on the History of Russian Philosophy*, Vladimir Belov emphasizes:

It would be incorrect to assume that the philosophical thinking of Ancient Rus' was entirely devoid of abstraction or avoided engaging with conceptual and categorical frameworks. Its inquiry into anthropological issues was particularly productive. The human being — his moral qualities, his capacity for transformation and salvation, which define both his social and personal spheres of existence — had already become the central problem of Russian philosophical thought by the 10th-12th centuries. Whereas the historical human being remained bound to the cultural tradition from which he emerged, requiring a pragmatic perspective, the problem of the human as such, independent of national-cultural belonging, was approached through the Eastern Christian viewpoint, itself shaped by the national peculiarities of Orthodox formation [1, pp. 37–38].

A study of the historical stages of Russian philosophy reveals an impressive diversity of currents that significantly influenced its development. On the one hand, the pagan cult; on the other, the adoption of the Orthodox branch of Christianity. On one side, the logic of the West; on the other, the spontaneity of the East. Throughout every historical period, Russian philosophy was marked by this inner conflict and tension — a crucial impulse for its enduring quest for self-definition.

In many of his works, V.N. Belov argues that the formation of modern philosophy is rooted in the creatively fertile soil cultivated by Russian thinkers of previous epochs. In particular, he highlights the contributions of the Russian Neo-Kantians: V. Vvedensky, V. Sezemann, B.V. Yakovenko, S.N. Hessen, S.L. Rubinstein, and A.V. Veideman.

Interest in Neo-Kantian studies is reflected in numerous publications by foreign scholars. A. Noras, C. Krijnen, H. Holzkamp, J. Stolzenberg, K.-W. Zeidler, L. Bertolino, T. Nemeth, A. Poma, and E. Gamba are among the contemporary researchers who reaffirm the enduring significance of Neo-Kantianism and post-Neo-Kantian thought. Professor Belov emphasizes the particular attention paid by Western philosophers to the works of S.I. Hessen on pedagogy and the political-legal development of social institutions. A substantial group of scholars in Italy, Poland, and Germany has studied Hessen's works since the mid-20th century.

Belov stresses:

Given the evident and fully justified rise of interest in the history of Russian Neo-Kantianism in recent years — not only on the part of domestic researchers but also from our Western colleagues — it is worth turning to one important aspect in the general characterization of this school as an independent and productive branch of Russian philosophy. Namely, it is important to note the sufficiently deep and stable influence of Russian Neo-Kantianism on Western philosophical and public thought [1, p. 203].

The ongoing work of Western scholars on the archival materials of Russian Neo-Kantians continues to reveal new dimensions of their intellectual legacy. Biographical details are being clarified, numerous facts of their active interaction with the cultural milieu of the countries of their emigration have been discovered, and earlier published yet long forgotten or rare works of Russian authors are being reintroduced into academic circulation [1, p. 214].

Neo-Kantianism, which emerged in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century, developed as an attempt to revive interest in Kant's critical method. It influenced many areas of philosophy, including ontology, epistemology, and ethics, as well as various sciences — mathematics, physics, and psychology — given Kant's focus on the limits of cognition and the conditions for the possibility of scientific knowledge. In Russia, Neo-Kantianism evolved alongside other influential movements, such as Marxism and religious philosophy. Yet the contribution of the Neo-Kantians to the development of philosophical thought cannot be overstated. The Marburg school brought new standards of scientific rigor and systematicity into Russian thought, while the Baden school fostered the development of axiology as an independent field.

In Russia, Neo-Kantianism acquired unique features, intertwining with the idea of national distinctiveness and simultaneously serving as an intellectual bridge between Russia and Europe. History has preserved numerous testimonies of fruitful scholarly friendships among the Neo-Kantians. An important milestone of such cooperation was the publication of the international journal *Logos*. Russian Neo-Kantians firmly resisted subordinating philosophical thinking to religious doctrine (i.e., teleologism and mysticism) or scientific theory (i.e., positivism or scientism), insisting instead on the autonomy and highest sovereignty of philosophical thinking. Through this, the characteristically Russian spirit of ontologism and the ongoing dispute between Slavophilism and Westernism were revitalized.

Boris Yakovenko, in his *Thirty Years of Russian Philosophy*, emphasized that one of the most significant neo-Westernist currents in Russian philosophy of the early twentieth century was certainly Neo-Kantianism.

Thus, we may conclude that Neo-Kantianism exerted substantial influence on both Western and Russian philosophy, enriching each and providing fertile ground

for the development of modern culture, science, and philosophical thought. According to Belov, Russian Neo-Kantians understood their philosophical mission as a necessary preparatory stage in the formation of the national philosophical tradition, serving as true mediators between European and Russian — and more broadly, social-scientific — thought [2, p. 29].

Exploring the reasons behind the emergence of Neo-Kantianism in Russia, Professor Belov draws attention to the fact that Russian mentality is more accustomed to extreme positions: either materialism, which absolutizes empirical reality, or religious philosophy, which absolutizes transcendence. Neo-Kantianism thus found itself caught “between two fires”. The tendency toward maximalism is deeply rooted in Russian culture. As B.V. Vysheslavitsev wrote in *The Eternal in Russian Philosophy*, Russian thinkers have always aspired to ultimate answers and the comprehension of the final meaning of existence.

Furthermore, in addressing the question of Russian philosophical identity, Belov notes correctly that the Russian philosophical tradition lacked a deep-rooted practice of epistemological debate. There were no native Descartes, Kants, or Hegels. Therefore, whereas in Western philosophy the spread of Neo-Kantian epistemologism was perceived as a defense of philosophical autonomy, in Russia such a “reduction” of worldview-oriented reflection to epistemology was often regarded as a departure from genuinely philosophical tasks. As P. Yurkevich, Solovyov’s teacher, famously wrote: “To know, it is not necessary to possess knowledge of knowledge itself”.

Specialist in Russian Neo-Kantianism Vladimir Belov writes:

The main characteristic of all Russian philosophy — its close interconnectedness with life and its aspiration to present philosophy not merely as a science of the a priori conditions of knowledge, but as a broader worldview — left its imprint on the thinking of Russian Neo-Kantians as well [1, p. 201].

Moreover, while examining the Neo-Kantian tradition in Russia, it is important to consider that many Neo-Kantians themselves doubted the Neo-Kantian character of their own philosophizing — the most striking example being A.I. Vvedensky, the founder of Russian Neo-Kantianism.

In analyzing the philosophical ideas of B.V. Yakovenko (1884–1949), Belov particularly highlights his critical disposition: “His motto could well have been a rephrasing of Descartes: ‘I criticize, therefore I am’” [3, p. 136]. A student of Heinrich Rickert and one of the editors of *Logos*, Yakovenko creatively reinterpreted earlier intellectual traditions and developed his own concept of pluralistic philosophy. His distinctive view lay in the assertion that only philosophy — standing at the summit of cultural development — can aspire to grasp genuine reality, i.e., Being.

Belov emphasizes Yakovenko’s invaluable contribution to the contemporary philosophical schools and currents of his time. Despite his critical attitude — or, more precisely, thanks to it — the Russian philosopher enabled the national philosophical tradition to discover new and fruitful paths for its development. Although Yakovenko devoted considerable attention to the history of Russian philosophy, he consistently argued that no national philosophy existed in a strict sense: “The Russian spirit has not yet lived through any tradition in full measure and has produced nothing genuinely original... Everything Russia has had and given in philosophy has either arisen from direct imitation, or from unconscious

submission to foreign influences, or from eclectic attempts to fuse several dominant foreign currents into one” [3, p. 713]. Even such seemingly pessimistic assessments constitute a productive challenge for future generations of scholars.

Assessing Yakovenko’s contribution to twentieth-century philosophical development, Professor Belov underscores that he was one of the creators of the “ontological turn,” alongside N.O. Lossky, S.L. Frank, and V.E. Sezemann. His critical stance toward many philosophical currents — including his opposition to the religious tradition (Berdyaev, Bulgakov, Florensky)—stands as a remarkable example of genuine philosophical rigor and unwavering commitment to intellectual integrity.

Thus, we may argue that the presence of such prominent figures in Russian philosophy underscores its distinctiveness and unique character.

Professor Belov has systematically examined the works of foreign scholars — T. Botz-Bornstein, D. Jonkus, L. Donskis, E. Tarasti, A. Sverdiolas, L. Anilionytė, and A. Lozuraitis — and has translated into Russian several key works by Vasily Sezemann, including *The Problem of Idealism in Philosophy*, *Plato’s Ethics and the Problem of Evil*, and *On the Problem of Pure Knowledge*. On this basis, he concludes that “V. Sezemann considered himself a man of Russian culture” [4, p. 414].

In 2022, under Belov’s supervision, a special issue of the *RUDN Journal of Philosophy* (Vol. 26, No. 1) was published, dedicated to the theme “The Exile of Reason: On the Centenary of the Philosophers’ Ship.” This issue explored how historical events shaped the development of Russian philosophy and culture. The study of the diverse philosophical activities of the Russian intelligentsia abroad once again raises the question of the features and specificities of Russian philosophical thought during this complex period. Thus, even far from their homeland, Russian philosophers continued to serve their intellectual mission faithfully. This historical fact stands as a vivid manifestation of Russian identity and national character, continuing to attract scholarly attention to this day.

Belov emphasizes:

Even during the harshest periods of Stalinist repression, when any deviation from the party line was brutally punished, P. Florensky, L.P. Karsavin, A.F. Losev continued to work in the conditions of concentration camps, while M.M. Bakhtin, E.V. Ilyenkov, and M.K. Mamardashvili continued to write ‘for the drawer’ [1, p. 495].

In examining contemporary Russian philosophy, Professor Belov emphasizes that it remains a relatively young and not yet fully consolidated phenomenon, which presents considerable difficulties for scholarly analysis. The factors that have shaped the modern philosophical tradition arise, on the one hand, from the intellectual legacy of the Soviet period, and on the other, from innovative transformations associated with globalization, digitalization, and the emergence of a new social order. These processes — both past and present — form a unique synthesis of new worldview orientations and conceptual frameworks.

The development of contemporary philosophy in Russia has been influenced by both Soviet philosophical thought and the Russian religious tradition. Belov stresses that a defining feature of Soviet-era philosophy can be described, drawing on M. Buber’s expression, as an “epoch of homelessness”. Despite the stringent censorship and ideological control characteristic of the Soviet period, Russian

philosophical thought nevertheless contained an implicit tension and latent disagreement with the regime.

As a specialist in Russian philosophy, Belov identifies three major stages in the formation of contemporary Russian philosophy.

The first stage represents a “mild” form of intellectual dissent from dominant ideology, exemplified by the philosophy of E.V. Ilyenkov.

The second stage is characterized by a more “rigorous” or radical philosophical stance, found in the works of A.F. Losev, M.M. Bakhtin, and M.K. Mamardashvili.

The third stage corresponds to the post-Soviet era, associated with such thinkers as S.S. Khoruzhiy, A.S. Panarin, N.P. Ilyin, A.G. Dugin, and Yu.V. Mamleev.

Among the most promising and productive areas of development within contemporary Russian philosophy are comparative studies in the history of philosophy, analyses of global challenges and the crisis of modern civilization, investigations of Russia’s role within these processes, as well as philosophical reflections on new scientific ideas and achievements, and the formation of the modern scientific worldview.

Professor Belov, in his exploration of Russian identity, emphasizes that debates on this topic have never truly subsided, and the contemporary geopolitical situation surrounding Ukraine, as well as global tensions more broadly, has only intensified scholarly interest in this issue. Many foreign researchers typically reduce the “Russian Idea” to the notion of an oppositional relationship between Russia and the West. However, Belov — who has devoted many years to a deep philosophical examination of this question — justifiably stresses that the genuine “Russian Idea” is critical not only of the West but also of its own “native soil” (*pochvennichestvo*), and even more so of the East. The authentic “Russian Idea” asserts only that humanity has not yet found its path and remains in a state of searching. For this ongoing search, a certain distancing from the seductive allure of the West is necessary — a kind of immunization against that allure. Thus, according to Belov, it is more accurate to speak not of Russia’s relationship only to the West, but rather of its relationship to both the West and the East. The intellectual productivity of such an understanding of the “Russian Idea” was demonstrated by Eurasianism. Emerging in the first half of the twentieth century among Russian émigrés, it became the only intellectually fruitful movement within the émigré milieu precisely because it proposed a synthetic solution to the long-standing conflict between Westernizers and Slavophiles [1, p. 546].

In analyzing the “Russian Idea”, it is important to take into account the major historical stages of Russia’s development that have had a profound impact on the formation of Russian identity. Belov identifies several such stages:

- the theological (Metropolitan Hilarion);
- the state-centered (Theophanes Prokopovich);
- the philosophical-cultural (Slavophiles and Westernizers, the school of Vladimir Solovyov, and F.M. Dostoevsky);
- the socialist (after the Revolution and during the Cold War);
- and the contemporary stage, marked by Western sanctions that have contributed to an unprecedented rise in patriotism [1, p. 547].

All these elements of the “cultural code” of the Russian people have found expression in diverse forms of creative activity among Russia’s thinkers.

A crucial and remarkably rich period in the development of Russian philosophy was the nineteenth century. The literary-philosophical culture of the Golden Age engaged profoundly with perennial philosophical questions concerning the essence and nature of the world, the human being, freedom, happiness, death, and immortality. Like the philosophy of its time, Russian poetry also addressed the challenges of social life, was imbued with a spirit of patriotism, and served as a “bell of freedom” advocating justice. A.F. Losev famously referred to literature as a “treasury of original Russian philosophy” [5]. In this sense, Russian literature and poetry may rightfully be considered integral components of the national philosophical tradition.

According to Belov, the main principles of the “Russian Idea” can be outlined as follows:

In politics — resistance to U.S. hegemony and affirmation of a multipolar world; the emergence of a new type of political figure — open, dialogically oriented, yet capable of defending national interests.

In culture — the elevation of culture into the principal stronghold of the “Russian Idea.” Russian culture becomes the symbolic medium through which, on the one hand, national and confessional insularity is overcome by demonstrating the universal significance of Russian cultural achievements, and on the other hand, the unique character of the Russian soul and Russian temperament is subtly expressed. Through culture, the “Russian Idea” acquires real embodiment in the notion of the “Russian World”, meaning a community united by a shared language and cultural values.

In education — an effort to counterbalance the Bologna system and to defend the humanistic dimension of education at all levels. Education is understood not merely as instruction, but as formation (in the sense of *о́браз*), with significant emphasis placed on patriotic upbringing. In secondary education, resistance to Bologna takes two primary forms: preserving and expanding instructional hours devoted to Russian language, literature, and history, and developing textbooks that emphasize the Russian literary canon and celebrate national heroism during critical periods of Russian history.

In religion — this remains, in Belov’s view, the most vulnerable dimension of the “Russian Idea”. The Russian Orthodox Church, despite being the largest of the Orthodox Churches, has yet to become a genuine leader of the Orthodox world and still struggles to establish stable and constructive forms of interaction with the state and with non-Orthodox religious communities. Paradoxically, the Russian Church often maintains more productive dialogue with Islam and Judaism than with other Christian denominations.

Conclusion

Russian philosophy constitutes a unique intellectual phenomenon that unites historicity, moral seriousness, and religiosity — aimed at seeking fundamental existential orientations for contemporary Russian culture and society. Russian philosophical thought is original, expansive, and diverse. In most of its schools and movements, exceptional attention is devoted to the theme of spirituality as a central characteristic of human existence. Russian philosophy embodies tremendous potential for humanism, morality, knowledge, and faith. It occupies a distinguished place within the global history of philosophy and possesses undeniable world significance.

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В поисках русской идентичности: философские темы в творчестве В.Н. Белова

А.В. Лебедева 

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Аннотация. В последнее время все больше внимания уделяется вопросу русской идентичности. В связи с этим возникает потребность детального изучения этого феномена в современных условиях. Рассмотрена русская философия как фактор национальной идентичности. Особое внимание уделено работам по истории русской философии профессора В.Н. Белова.

Ключевые слова: русская философия, Россия, национальная идентичность, история русской философии, русское неокантианство, немецкое неокантианство, В.Н. Белов, В.Э. Сеземан, Б.В. Яковенко, специфика русского неокантианства

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