

## Socrates in Russia

# Contemporary Russian Philosophy

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# Socrates in Russia

*Edited by*

Alyssa DeBlasio  
Victoria Juharyan



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*In memory of our friend and colleague,  
Denis Saltykov (1988–2021)  
—a Socratic life*





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## Foreword

Few figures stand more at philosophy's crucial intersections with life, literature, politics, and history than Socrates. Perhaps for that reason the image of Socrates has been the subject of constant contestation and reinterpretation across cultures and generations—from the ancient versions of Socrates in the writings of Plato, Xenophon, and the Hellenistic schools to the Socrateses of Nietzsche and Foucault.

Yet in both Anglo-American and Western Continental European philosophy, there is still a limited palette of such images known to most philosophical readers. That Socrates has been for more than two hundred years the subject of intense Russian reimaginings—in biographies, dialogues, and literary and philosophical texts—is unexplored territory for many readers.

It is precisely this uncharted territory that the editors of this volume have begun to open up for English-language readers, with a series of explorations of Socrates' presence in writers as diverse as Herzen, Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Bulgakov, and in writings that—much as Aristotle claimed for the mimetic abilities of Plato's dialogues—push against existing genre boundaries and open new literary possibilities.

What lies philosophically behind the appeal of Socrates for these Russian writers? To begin with, there is the remarkable *immediacy* Socrates' image has for many readers who take up his question of how to live one's life, if an unexamined life is not worth living. This was, as Pierre Hadot's work has suggested, *the* crucial question animating ancient philosophy, especially among the Hellenistic schools, and one that led to various forms of practice or *askēsis* that appropriated Socrates in different ways.<sup>1</sup> Socrates became in this context, for example, not simply a master of specific modes of elenctic search but an almost unapproachable *pattern or model of life who* could inspire the practice of daily lives (witness Epictetus the Stoic reminding his readers that “death is nothing dreadful... or else it would have appeared dreadful to Socrates”).<sup>2</sup>

In the Russian context, the immediacy of Socrates' appeal for living one's own life can be seen above all in the enduring figure of Gregory Skovoroda (1722–1794). As Alyssa DeBlasio and Victoria Juharyan point out in their editors' introduction, Skovoroda saw that while there were many aspirants to be

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1 Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995).

2 Epictetus, *The Handbook (The Encheiridion)*, trans. Nicholas P. White (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 5:13.

Russian Platos, Aristotles, Zenos, and Epicuruses, all of these later figures must be seen as stemming from Socrates in the first place, just as a chick grows from the yolk of an egg.

This immediacy is not simply a matter of private life, but intersects inevitably with larger historical currents. As Olga Lyanda-Geller notes in chapter ten, the power of this appeal for a figure like Konstantin Sotonin is direct in the sense that Socrates allows a reader to overleap intervening years of philosophical tradition and interpretation: it is Socrates—and only Socrates—who “is fit for today” and can thus “decisively cross out in the book of history of philosophy the twenty-three centuries of idealistic drivel from Plato to the mid-nineteenth century...”<sup>3</sup>

The social and political importance of Socrates in the context of such engagements suggests, as Brian Armstrong argues in chapter four, that the philosophical practice of Socratic self-examination is not so much a means of knowing *one's own* self apart from others but “a means of knowing *ourselves*.”<sup>4</sup> In the context of this broader sense of self-examination, the trial of Socrates looms especially large. In the *Apology*, Socrates manages to turn the tables against his accusers, conducting at the trial an interrogation of his accuser Meletus and questioning whether in fact the good Athenian jurors supposedly trying *his* case were in fact as serious about their understandings of what citizenship requires as he had been. The notion of a trial set up putatively to examine Socrates but in effect examining the *polis* around him runs deep within the Russian reflections on Socrates. Many of the Russian Socratic encounters involve such interrogations—some of them, like Sotonin's, involving the familiar charge of corruption. As Lyanda-Geller's essay describes, Edvard Radzinsky wrote a play in 1969 that he initially imagined (prior to a half-decade of censorship) as a farce, but which became—in the wake of a reading of Tolstoy's version of the *Apology* and of repeated efforts by the authorities to link the figure of Socrates in the play to successive dissidents (Siniavsky, Daniel, Solzhenitsyn, Sakharov)—a tragedy.

There are a number of tragic resonances of Socrates' life that can be heard throughout the essays here, from Skovoroda's prophetic insistence that a Russian Socrates was a *need* rather than a reality he could claim to Herzen's famous comment about the Russian lyre as having the three strings of “sadness, skepticism, and irony.”<sup>5</sup> But Plato's own famous attempt at the end of

<sup>3</sup> Lyanda-Geller, c. 10, 225.

<sup>4</sup> Armstrong, c. 4, 87.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in DeBlasio, c. 13, 290.

the *Symposium* to link the three strings of tragedy, comedy, and philosophy to the figures of Agathon, Aristophanes, and Socrates seems also to lie behind Losev's juxtaposition of the "majestic and tragic unity" of Socrates with the spirit of what is also "funny, comic, frivolous, fluttering, and sophistic."<sup>6</sup>

In her concluding essay for the volume, Alyssa DeBlasio follows Losev in emphasizing the "enigma" that Socrates was—and (inevitably) remains for all of us. In one of the most famous images of Socrates within the Platonic corpus, the youthful Alcibiades compared Socrates to the silenus figurines that were available in the Athenian marketplace at the time (an image that seems to have inspired Skovoroda among others).<sup>7</sup> The remarkable thing about these silenus statuettes, Alcibiades says, is that they hold inside a set of tantalizing images (*agalmata*)—images that he sees also within Socrates and that gesture thus to another level of life and beauty not visible to those who only see his exterior. Alcibiades' quest to break open the puzzle of Socrates, of course, foundered on difficulties in his own character, but the notion of bringing to light what has not been seen by others is an enduring trope of Socratic literature. A clear achievement of this volume is the discovery in the "Russian" Socrates of a set of images that may have been hidden or obscured in Western culture but that may have new and enduring power for our ongoing philosophical exploration.

*Allen Speight*

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<sup>6</sup> Lyanda-Geller, c. 10, 227.

<sup>7</sup> Skovoroda, *Silenus Alcibiadis* (1775).

## Acknowledgements

My profound gratitude goes out to all the authors of this volume, for their intellectual insights, as well as for their commitment to the project in trying times: we began our writing during the early months of the coronavirus pandemic, and the copyediting concluded during the early days and weeks of war. In its final stages, this volume benefited immensely from Anatoly Pinsky's editorial expertise and intellectual rigor.

I would also like to thank Erika Mandarino and Helena Schoeb, editors in Philosophy at Brill, as well as the entire Brill production team, for their continued support of the book series in Contemporary Russian Philosophy.

Finally, I am deeply grateful to my co-editor, Victoria Juharyan, for her intellectual companionship during this process and for introducing me, and welcoming me, to the seed of the idea that would become this volume. When I moved into my office at Dickinson College in 2010, the collected works of Hryhory Skovoroda were already on the shelf; this project was a long-overdue opportunity to consider those works more deeply, as well as the theme of Socratic influence more broadly, from Skovoroda through Mamardashvili.

*Alyssa DeBlasio*  
Carlisle, Pennsylvania

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This collected volume, which I had the honor of co-editing with my incredibly talented and capable colleague Alyssa DeBlasio, would not have been possible without teachers (living and in print) at Saint-Petersburg State University, New York University, The New School of Social Research, Dartmouth College, Princeton University, as well as The New York City Continental Philosophy Reading Group and the continuous support of friends, colleagues, and brilliant students. The NYC Continental Philosophy Reading Group and Literary Salon, which I joined in 2008, initiated me into a serious and thorough study of philosophy through close readings of seminal works by Kant, Hegel, Plato, and others. I will be eternally grateful to Sharon Girard, Sean Bray, Stephan Shaw, and other organizers and participants of this world of ideas and dialogues that changed my life.

Born and raised in Armenia, I studied my first Platonic dialogues in high school and at Saint-Petersburg State University in Russia. Some of our professors from the philosophy department would use a simple but ironic trick to

fail unprepared students by asking them whether they had read any Socrates. A “yes” to such a question during a Philosophy or History of Philosophy exam would immediately result in an “F,” regardless of what else they might have read or not read, for it was a blunt lie. Alas, we cannot read Socrates—but we can read *about* him as well as other figures of wisdom, who have tried to contemplate or emulate a life of proper thought.

For me, the project “Socrates in Russia” dates back to at least 2017, when I began immersing myself in Gregory Skovoroda’s dialogues and poetry, while contributing to an epistolary novel about Euromaidan with Victoria Somoff and students at Dartmouth College, titled *War and We (Voina i my)*, from the perspective of a philosophy Ph.D. student at Kyiv National University. It was then that I decided to study Skovoroda more seriously and to begin writing a book on his philosophy, and to title it by quoting Skovoroda himself as *Socrates in Russia: Hryhory Skovoroda*.

In 2019, Alyssa and I co-organized the roundtable “Socrates in Russia” for ASEES (San Francisco, CA), which was extremely well received by our esteemed audience and participants. I am immensely grateful to Alyssa for proposing that we collect and publish the presented works, which grew over the years for the following eponymous stream of panels we did for AATSEEL, planning for the volume to come out in 2022 to commemorate Skovoroda’s 300th birthday.

I would also like to extend my infinite gratitude to my eminent teachers: Caryl Emerson, Alexander Nehamas, Claudia Brodsky, Desmond Hogan, Jeffrey Stout, Cornell West, Michael Wachtel, Ilya Vinitsky, Daniel Garber, Nikolay Bogomolov, Sandra Bermann, Michael Wood, Stephan Kotkin, Dmitry Bykov, Ellen Chances, Olga Hasty, Kirill Ospovat, Christian Wilddberg, Gilbert Herman, Anthony Grafton, Leo Russel, Hans Halvorson, Serguei Oushakine, Christiane Frey, Katherine M.H. Reischl, Michael Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Joel B. Lande at Princeton University; John McDowell, Robert Brandom, Nicholas Rescher, Thomas Ricketts, Michael Thompson, James Shaw, and Christina M. Hoenig at the University of Pittsburgh; John Kopper, Victoria Somoff, Alfia Rakova, Deborah A. Garretson, Barry Scherr, Amy Allen, Ellis Shookman, Brett Gamboa, Tim Perry, Eric Miller, Irene Kacandes, Lawrence D. Kritzman, Klaus Mladek, Silvia Spitta, Rebecca Elizabeth Biron, David LaGuardia, Roxana Michaela Verona, and Margaret Williamson at Dartmouth College; Jay Bernstein, Richard J. Bernstein, Yirmiyahu Yovel, Raymond Weisman, Anne Margaret Daniel, and Faye-Ellen Silverman at The New School of Social Research and its Mannes School of Music; and Olga Neupokoeva, Tatyana Misakovna, Svetlana Smetanina, Igor Evlampiev, and Gayana G. Anpetkova at Saint Petersburg State University.

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Alexander Nehamas' books *On Friendship* (2016), *The Art of Living* (1998), *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (1985) and Allen Speight's *Hegel, Literature and the Problem of Agency* (2001) are among my favorites, and it's been my great honor to have studied and worked with my intellectual heroes.

Without Caryl Emerson's most generous presence, charitable readings, and magnanimous spirit, I would not have dared to sustain and develop my own ideas and projects. I will forever be indebted to her in more ways than I can begin to acknowledge here.

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(1988–2021) was a scholar of cinema and culture, with a focus on contemporary popular culture, cult film, horror film, and sociological theories of cinema. His publications appear in *Studies in the Fantastic*, *KinoKultura*, *New Literary Observer*, *Sociology of Power*, and *Iskusstvo Kino*, as well as the popular Russian websites *Kino-Teatr* and *Knife.Media*. He was trained in philosophy at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (Moscow) and in film studies and Slavic studies at the University of Pittsburgh.

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The Brill series in Contemporary Russian Philosophy addresses a scholarly audience interested in contemporary thought as it is practiced in Russia, but not necessarily experts in both the disciplines of philosophy *and* in Russian history, culture, and/or language. This governs several important editorial decisions, including our approach to transliteration, where the aim is to make Russian proper names accessible to the non-specialist in English, while also ensuring that original sources remain accessible to the specialist.

To this end, all bibliographical references, both in-text and in footnotes and bibliographies, are transliterated from Russian according to the simplified ALA-LC Romanization table. Proper names in the body of the text are largely transliterated according to the same system, but with some important modifications, including the omission of all diacritical marks (e.g., soft signs) and the choice to condense the final vowel combinations *иѳ* and *уѳ* as *y*, as only in this case does it reduce the number of letters in the final product: i.e, Vasily Zenkovsky and not Vasili Zen'kovskii, but Sergei Trubetskoi. In the case of well-known figures, we employ commonly accepted spellings when possible: Fyodor Dostoevsky, Yuri Lotman, Leo Tolstoy. We also always use an author's preferred and regular spelling of their own name when known. Complete details on transliteration rules for the series can be found on the Brill website.

In addition, original Russian titles of works are transliterated in the body of the text only when not presented in the notes.

Choices about transliteration from other languages have been left to the professional expertise of individual authors.