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NATION AND NATIONALISM IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THOUGHT OF CONSTANTINE LEONTIEV

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Abstract:

The paper examines ideological concepts and theories of the Russian philosopher and diplomat Constantine Leontiev (1831-1891) on the issues of modern nationalism. He criticized modern nationalism, which was just a manifestation and a product of the two main targets of his criticism – political liberalism and social egalitarianism. He opposed national idea to religious idea and definitely gave preference to religious principles and values blaming nationalism for cultural decline and depersonalization, and lack of originality and creativity. By examining the European and Balkan national movements in the 19th century, Leontiev made the paradoxical conclusion that political nationalism destroys cultural nationalism. National policy created cosmopolitan uniformity and fusion, not national peculiarity. Modern nationalism, however, was one of the fundamentals on which 19th century Europe was build.

Keywords: nationalism, Eastern question, Church history, Russian religious philosophy

Benedict Anderson, a prominent contemporary theorist of nationalism, paid attention to one of the paradoxes of his subject: The “political” power of nationalism vs. its philosophical

poverty and emptiness¹. Unlike most other isms, nationalism has never produced its own grand thinkers. It, however, produced its grand philosophical opponents and even enemies. My paper is dedicated to one of them – the Russian writer and diplomat Constantine Leontiev. Leontiev was the most enigmatic and original figure in the Russian intellectual history of the 19th century. He did not belong to any particular school of thought. His paradoxical and provocative ideas were encountered by antagonism or indifference and he did not have any political or intellectual influence. His aristocratic, reactionary, monarchist, and universalistic ideology was highly unpopular in the age of democracy, nationalism, and political liberalism. Leontiev remained unappreciated, misunderstood, and even unknown, but his conceptions and particularly his original theory of nationality deserve special attention.

Like most of his theories and ideas, his views on nationalism were formed and developed during his diplomatic career in the Ottoman Empire between 1863 and 1874. His most significant book, *Byzatism and Slavdom*², was also inspired by his experience and impressions from the Balkans and the life of local Christians. Leontiev was a Russian consul in Crete, Adrianople, Ioannina, Thessalonica, and Tulca. He also spent some years in Constantinople and after his religious conversion - on Mount Athos, wishing to become a monk. Leontiev had the opportunity to observe the construction of modern national identity among the Balkan peoples, which was built on the basis of the anti-Christian ideology of the European Enlightenment and in conflict to their Byzantine legacy and Orthodoxy. This was especially valid for the Bulgarians, whose national awakening was marked by bitter confrontation with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Balkan peoples were influenced by the Western Civilization in a stage of its decline and this influence was dangerous and pernicious, according to Leontiev. Especially dangerous was the modern nationalism, which was a manifestation and a product of the two main targets of his criticism – political liberalism and social egalitarianism. He stated that “national

¹ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London, Verso, 2006, p. 5.

² *Byzatism and Slavdom (Византизм и славянство)* was first published in: *Чтения в Императорском Обществе истории и древностей российских при Московском университете*. Москва 1875, №3; отдельное издание: Москва 1876. It was included in his collection of works: К. Леонтьев, *Восток, Россия и Славянство*, Москва, 1996, 94-155; We cite here from its Bulgarian edition: К. Леонтиев, *Византизмът и славянството*. София, ИК „Славика – Емил Димитров“, 1993.

principle without religion becomes egalitarian and liberal principle, which slowly but surely destroys everything on its way”³. Leontief found fundamental contradiction and opposition between nationalism and Christianity, which was similar to the opposition between nation state and empire, particularity and universality. Dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th and 20th century was accompanied by dismemberment of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which needed an imperial structure to exist. Modern nationalism became a driving force for dissolution of both the Ottoman Empire and Ecumenical Patriarchate. Leontief was an ardent proponent of Ecumenical ideology and monarchy/empire and he definitely gave preference to religious principles and values blaming nationalism for cultural decline and depersonalization, and lack of originality and creativity. By examining the European and Balkan national movements in the 19th century, Leontief made the paradoxical conclusion that political nationalism destroys cultural nationalism. National policy created cosmopolitan uniformity and fusion, not national peculiarity:

“The idea of the nations, which was endorsed in the 19th century, is actually an extremely cosmopolitan, anti-statist, anti-religious idea. It has a large destructive force, there is nothing creative in itself, and it can not contribute for the cultural differentiation of the nations. Culture is indeed peculiarity and originality, but peculiarity is subjected to nearly ubiquitous annihilation from political liberalism. Individualism destroys the individuality of people, provinces, and nations”⁴.

Leontief’s position to the Eastern question and Greco-Bulgarian church conflict was contrary to the official Russian policy, public opinion, and *Slavophile* ideology. He sympathized with the Greeks and Turks and did not like the Slavs, especially Bulgarians. He was repelled by the egalitarianism, liberalism, and democratism of the South Slavs and accused them of lack of religiosity, spirituality, and originality. He preferred the Poles, liked their aristocratism and devotion to Catholicism, and considered a possible Polish uprising against Russia as less dangerous than the surreptitious activities of the South Slavic “democrats” and “progressists”. He also supported the preservation of the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires for as long as possible, because they restrained Balkan nationalisms and maintained the conservative traditions of

³ Леонтиев, *Византизмът и славянството*, 162.

⁴ Леонтиев, *Византизмът и славянството*, 52.

monarchy and religion. Russia should pursue Christian, not national policy in his opinion. By “Christian policy” he meant a policy in favour of the Church and endorsement of religion. Leontiev passionately supported the Greeks in Greco-Bulgarian church controversy of the second half of the 19th century. He believed that Greeks were faithful to Orthodoxy and the Byzantine tradition in contrast to Bulgarians, who were atheist demagogues, who used religion for political purposes and for protection of their narrow national interests. Nevertheless, he accused both Greeks and Bulgarians in the heresy of *philetism* or church nationalism. The only difference between Greek and Bulgarian *philetism* was that the former was offensive and the latter – defensive⁵.

Leontiev claimed that the struggle of the Balkan Christian peoples for liberty and independence was just a form of the world’s egalitarian revolution. And paradoxically – the Ottoman authority was the only protector of their cultural and religious identity and of Orthodoxy itself⁶. Leontiev found that the principle of national self-determination was a democratic principle and its outcome was revolutionary. Its triumph was actually a triumph of the liberal and egalitarian progress, which destroys national originality. He gave the example of Greece, Italy, and Germany in order to proof his paradoxical conclusion. These countries became more colorless and similar to each other (and to any other European country) after their liberation and unification. Creation of a common nation state erased regional diversity and local peculiarities and traditions. The outcome of the national emancipation was cosmopolitan fusion, loss of national identity, and levelling. When nationalism was not concerned of its own interests, but of the interests of religion, monarchy, and aristocracy, it was growing unwittingly. ...Now, when nationalism seeks ways to emancipate itself and to organize the people not in the name of God and monarchy, but only in the name of the national unity and liberation, the result is always and everywhere the same – Nations and people are getting more and more common and similar to each other, and as a result – more and more poor in spirit⁷.

⁵ К. Леонтьев, Панславизм и греки, В: К. Леонтьев, *Восток, Россия и Славянство*, Москва, 1996, с. 38-55.

⁶ Леонтьев, *Византизмът и славянството*, 161.

⁷ К. Леонтьев, Национальная политика как орудие всемирной революции, В: Леонтьев, *Восток, Россия и Славянство*, с. 512-534.

Leontiev thought that Russia should support not the narrow Slavism but Orthodoxy and not to lose the confidence of the non-Slavic Orthodox Christians in the Balkans. Eastern question was not a Slavic question, as was considered by some *Slavophile* circles in Russia. Pan-Slavism was counterproductive and dangerous in Leontiev's opinion, because it was based on the modern national and liberal ideology. In reality, Pan-Slavism was a fiction. Creation of united Slavic state would weaken and even destroy Russia, and would be unwanted by the other Slavs⁸. The irrational Greek fear of Pan-Slavism was baseless because Russia did not support only Slavic nations but Orthodoxy. Moreover, the Slavic peoples were not united and often had conflicting interests. Common origins and similar language could never be a source of unity and agreement, if the ideologies are opposing. Leontiev criticized the Russian participation in the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-1878, which led to the liberation of Bulgaria because it was a war for the Slavs, not for Orthodoxy. Russia should better wage a war in 1870 to protect the unity of the Church and against the Bulgarian schism⁹. Leontiev defined Russian support for the Bulgarians as "self-deception" and predicted that they will not promote Russia's interests in the Balkans¹⁰. Like most of his predictions and prophecies this one also became a reality.

The annexation of Constantinople not the emancipation of the Slavs should become a priority aim to the Russian foreign policy, according to Leontiev. Constantinople should become Russian because of its strategic geopolitical position and spiritual and religious significance. Russia did not need it for the realization of its imperialistic ambitions but for the fulfillment of its cultural and religious mission in history. In Leontiev's visions of the future Constantinople should become not administrative but cultural and political center of a new eastern Slavic-Asian civilization headed by Russia. This new eastern civilization should be built on religious and autocratic principles, not on national principles.

There is a significant difference between nationalism and imperialism. Nationalism is a source of particularization, and imperialism is a source of universalization. Nationalism is provincial and pagan, while imperialism corresponds to global messianism and seeks to achieve

⁸ К. Леонтьев, Панславизм и греки I, В: Леонтьев, *Восток, Россия и Славянство*, с. 38-55.

⁹ К. Леонтьев, Плоды национальных движений на православном Востоке XIII, В: Леонтьев, *Восток, Россия и Славянство*, с. 534-566.

¹⁰ К. Леонтьев, Письма отшельника, В: Леонтьев, *Восток, Россия и Славянство*, с. 166-175.

universal unity. Ecumenical ideology has always been closely related to imperial ideology and it's logical that ecumenist like Leontiev was also an imperialist. Like his friend Vladimir Solovyov, Leontiev was a Universalist, who believed that universal principles and values were the real fundament of the national building and bloom. For Vladimir Solovyov such a universal idea was the Roman idea, while for Leontiev – the Byzantine idea. Solovyov supported the unification of the Orthodox and Catholic churches under the leadership of the Roman Pope, while Leontiev considered it counterproductive and pointless. He believed that Russia should remain faithful to Byzantism which, like Catholicism, was universal not national principle.

Leontiev's philosophy of history was influenced by the theory of Nikolay Danilevsky of change of cultural-historical types and development, heyday, and decay of civilizations¹¹. Like Danilevsky he adopted a cyclical view of history and opposed it to the evolutionary and progressive view. Similar to Danilevsky, he thought that a new eastern Orthodox civilization should replace the aging Romano-German civilization of the Modern West. Danilevsky excluded Byzantium from his classification of civilizations, while in Leontiev's conceptions the Eastern Roman Empire should become an exemplary model on which the new Eastern civilization should be build.

Leontiev's ideological use of Byzantium as an antithesis and possible future alternative of Modern Europe was provoked by his strong rejection of Modernity. His rejection was political, philosophical, and also – an aesthetic. Leontiev was not anti-westerner; he was romantic reactionary and vicious opponent of the ideas of the French revolution. His position was completely different from that of the *Slavophiles* who negated the basic principles on which the Western civilization was build. Leontiev loved Medieval Europe of Catholicism, papacy, chivalry, monarchy, and aristocracy and despised Modern Europe of bourgeoisie, democracy, and industry. He was attracted to Catholicism for aesthetic and political reasons. Leontiev praised Byzantism, Russia, and the East only because he hoped that they could stop the triumph of the godless philistine modern civilization, not because he believed in the superiority of the Slavs and Orthodoxy. He considered not only Catholicism but even Islam, Buddhism, and any kind of

¹¹ Н. Данилевский, *Россия и Европа*, Санкт Петербург, 1869.

spirituality necessary and beneficial to humanity. Any religion was preferable and better than the progressive utilitarian ideology.

There was not nationalism in the Middle Ages, it was a product of the Modern Age. Nationalism was a result of atheism and a form of idolatry. The Modern Age, however, is already over. We are already living in the *New Middle Ages*, as was mentioned by Nicolay Berdyaev, Alain Minc, Phil Williams and others. Desecularization of the world and religious revival, crisis of humanism, decline of nation states and emergence of universal unity, political instability and chaos, economic stagnation and beginning of the post-industrial era are significant phenomena, which give us reason to denote the postmodern world of globalization as a *New Middle Ages*. In this context, Leontief's vision of a new future, based on the Byzantine past seems not just as a romantic reaction to the past but rather as a very real perspective for the future.