

Karel Sládek

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**Nikolay Lossky  
and the Case  
for Mystical Intuition**

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# Preface

My interest in Russian thinking found encouragement from two significant figures: the theologian Tomáš cardinal Špidlík, who prompted me to write my doctoral thesis on the life and work of Vladimir Solovyov; and Professor Stanislav Soušedík, who suggested this latest research into the life, work and theological-philosophical legacy of Nikolay Lossky.

Lossky had a profound influence on Czechoslovak spiritual and academic life, a fact first impressed upon me during my research on Solovyov. Going deeper into Lossky's life and work opened me up to the boundless possibilities of Christian thought and provided me with a more profound understanding of the many spiritual and intellectual currents which the great philosopher variously adopted, developed, championed, engaged in dialogue with or openly criticised.

The Slavonic Library at the Czech National Library in Prague proved to be a rich source of material on the life and times of Lossky and other Russian émigrés in the First Czechoslovak Republic. I worked at the library for a time and had the good fortune to meet Anastasia Kopřivová, who provided me with an abundance of valuable information on the life of Russian exiles, including the Lossky family, and very kindly allowed me access to her private archive which contained numerous unpublished photographs from Lossky's life here in the Czech Republic.

Mrs Kopřivová also introduced me to Alexei Bezděk, whose grandfather Ctibor Bezděk pioneered ethicotherapy in the First Republic and applied Lossky's philosophy in his medical practice. Alexei shared a host of anecdotes about the friendship between his grandfather and Lossky and was kind enough to lend me their mutual correspondence.

My research on Lossky was published in the Czech book *Nikolaj Losskij: obhájce mystické intuice* and this current volume is a translation of that original work. It is my sincere hope that in Nikolay Lossky, readers will discover a thinker who opens new horizons of mystical knowledge and will be encouraged to pursue the struggle for a Christian vision of the world and the imminent reality of the kingdom of God.

*Chrudim, Czech Republic  
October 2019*



# Introduction

In the aftermath of the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and the collapse of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia, interest in the spiritual and intellectual legacy of the country's Russian émigrés, Nikolay Lossky among them, experienced a significant renaissance. We will begin our exploration of Lossky's life and work by setting out the main reasons for this explosion of interest and by outlining the aims and methodology of this research.

## **The Renewal of Interest in Lossky in the Czech Republic**

Nikolay Lossky was a key player in the intellectual life of the First Republic between the wars, a role he continued when he moved to Slovakia after the outbreak of war and the division of the Republic. In the post-war socialist era, Lossky's mystical worldview was first ridiculed then completely suppressed, but since 1989 there has been renewed interest in this Russian thinker; an entry for "Nikolaj Losskij" was even included in a dictionary of "Czech" philosophers.<sup>1</sup>

The collapse of the bipolar world prompted a boom in research into Russians who managed to escape the Bolsheviks and move to Czechoslovakia between the wars, and their migration began to be seen in a very different light in the new world that emerged after 1989. One of

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1 *Slovník českých filosofů* (Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 1998), 343–344.

the first entries in the historiography of this movement, a two-volume work by Martin Putna and Miluše Zadražilová called *Russia Outside Russia*,<sup>2</sup> includes a brief profile of Lossky. Irina Mesnjankina then included Lossky's thoughts in her compilation of Russian philosophical writings,<sup>3</sup> and over the next decade a stream of works appeared on related themes: a three-volume work from the National Library on Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian authors;<sup>4</sup> a multi-volume work about Russians and Ukrainians in exile in Czechoslovakia between 1918 and 1945;<sup>5</sup> a study by the Slavic Institute on spiritual currents among Russians and Ukrainians in exile in Czechoslovakia between the wars;<sup>6</sup> Ivan Savický's exploration of Czechs in Russia and Russians in Bohemia from 1914 to 1938;<sup>7</sup> an entry from the Slavonic Library on Russian life in Prague from 1921 to 1952;<sup>8</sup> and Jana Kostnicová's work on Russian poets in Czechoslovakia between the wars.<sup>9</sup> The most significant recent publications have been the monumental tome *Дом в изгнании* (Home in exile),<sup>10</sup> published in Russian by Russians living in the Czech Republic, and Jiří Vacek and Lukáš Babka's edited volume *Voices of the Exiled*, which grew out of the National Library's exhibition of journals published by exiles from Soviet Russia.<sup>11</sup> Lesley Chamberlain's *The Philosophy Steamer: Lenin and the Exile of the Intelligentsia* (2006), which reflects much on Lossky's story, was published in Czech in 2009.<sup>12</sup>

Set in the context of other waves of Russian migration to Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, Russian emigration during the First Republic is the subject of my own monograph on the Russian diaspora

2 Martin Putna and Miluše Zadražilová, *Rusko mimo Rusko*, 2 vols. (Brno: Petrov, 1993–94).

3 Irina Mesnjankina, *Neznámé Rusko (Ruský idealismus XX. století)* (Prague: Karolinum, 1995).

4 Zdeňka Rachůnková, ed., *Práce ruské, ukrajinské a běloruské emigrace vydané v Československu 1918–1945*, 3 vols. (Prague: Národní knihovna České republiky, 1996).

5 Václav Veber, Zdeněk Sládek, Miluša Bubeníková, and Lubica Harbulová, *Ruská a ukrajinská emigrace v ČSR v letech 1918–1945* (Prague: Karolinum, 1995).

6 Ljubova Běloševská, ed., *Duchovní proudy ruské a ukrajinské emigrace v Československé republice (1919–1939)* (Prague: Slovanský ústav AV ČR, 1999).

7 Ivan Savický, *Češi v Rusku a Rusové v Čechách 1914–1938* (Prague: Academia, 1999).

8 Anastázia Kopřivová, *Střediska ruského emigrantského života v Praze (1921–1952)* (Prague: Slovanská knihovna, 2001).

9 Jana Kostincová, *Poustevní básníků – básníci poustevní. Ruská poezie 20. a 30. let 20. století v pražském exilu* (Prague: Slovanská knihovna, 2008).

10 Marina Dobuševa and Viktorie Krymova, eds., *Дом в изгнании* (Prague: RT + RS, 2008).

11 Jiří Vacek and Lukáš Babka, eds., *Hlasy vyhnaných. Periodický tisk emigrace ze sovětského Ruska (1918–1945)* (Prague: Národní knihovna České republiky, 2009).

12 Lesley Chamberlain, *The Philosophy Steamer: Lenin and the Exile of the Intelligentsia* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006). In Czech: *Parník filosofů. Lenin a vyhnání inteligence*, trans. Jaroslav Kubrycht (Prague: Mladá fronta, 2009).

in the Czech lands.<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere I have written on themes such as Lossky and Czechoslovakia,<sup>14</sup> the kerygmatic church in Lossky's recollections,<sup>15</sup> and the spiritual evolution of the human person.<sup>16</sup> This current volume is a translation of a work already published in Czech.<sup>17</sup>

In 2004, two of Lossky's own works appeared in Czech bookshops: his *History of Russian Philosophy*<sup>18</sup> and *Teaching on Reincarnation*.<sup>19</sup> In his preface to the first of these works—on the subject of the “unenslavable experienced idea”—Michal Altrichter praises Lossky's “accessible but highly cultivated” writing style.<sup>20</sup> Although the book contains a number of factual errors and shows a distinct bias (for example, when defining itself in opposition to the materialists), Altrichter sees Lossky's work as “adverting to a transparent essence which seems to reveal itself in the dialogue between the reader and the author. We could call it the Archimedean point of the philosopher's endeavour.”<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps more questionable from the perspective of most Christian eschatology are passages from Lossky's teaching on reincarnation. In his preface, “Reincarnation and Eschatology,” Pavel Ambros sets the subject in the context of other, contemporary contributions from Hick, Rahner, Küng and von Balthasar, as if to prepare the way for reading Lossky without a priori preconceptions. Ambros considers Lossky the “more interesting” contributor to the debate, especially for those reading from within a post-Christian culture, but suggests that after his involuntary migration to the West, Lossky was determined to “[announce] his arrival by opening up a provocative and controversial subject.”<sup>22</sup>

In her otherwise somewhat neutral review, Michaela Moravčíková considered the book a “valuable and courageous contribution to the important discussion concerning the fate of souls, especially in light of the interpretation of Christian teaching on purgatory, but also in

13 Karel Sládek, *Ruská diaspora v České republice* (Červený Kostelec: Pavel Mervart, 2010).

14 Karel Sládek, “N. O. Losskij a Československo,” *Studia Theologica* 23 (2006): 45–61.

15 Karel Sládek, “Kerygmatická církev ve vzpomínkách Nikolaje Losského,” in Michael Altrichter et al., *Studijní texty ze spirituální teologie*. Vol. 4, *Duchovní život a kerygma* (Velehrad: Refugium, 2010), 69–78.

16 Karel Sládek, “Duchovní evoluce člověka u Nikolaje Losského,” *Teologické texty* 3 (2007): 141–143.

17 Karel Sládek, *Nikolaj Losskij: obhájce mystické intuice* (Červený Kostelec: Pavel Mervart, 2011).

18 Nikolaj Lossky, *Dějiny ruské filosofie* (Velehrad: Refugium, 2004).

19 Nikolaj Lossky, *Nauka o reinkarnaci* (Velehrad: Refugium, 2004).

20 Michal Altrichter, “Nezotročitelnost zakoušené ideje,” in Lossky, *Dějiny ruské filosofie*, 6.

21 Ibid., 10.

22 Pavel Ambros, “Reinkarnace a eschatologie,” in Lossky, *Nauka o reinkarnaci*, 9.

a dialogue about “the last things” in the context of Christian churches and world religions.”<sup>23</sup> More critical reactions were not long in coming, however. Miloš Mrázek appreciated Lossky’s ability to build an argument and support it with evidence, but after offering a *précis* of Lossky’s worldview, his prime concern is not in fact Lossky’s teaching on reincarnation but the contradictions he sees in Lossky’s notion of freedom: (1) The principal flaw in Lossky’s argument is, in Mrázek’s view, the idea of the freedom of the “substantial agents,” and that consciously directed free activity is attributed to both higher and lower agents, when in fact, according to Mrázek, the latter should be subordinated to the former; (2) Although Lossky anticipates this objection, there are inconsistencies in how he applies his thinking to the field of medicine. Here Mrázek uses the example of a higher agent denying a lower one the possibility of choice, such as a cancerous growth caused by an unhealthy lifestyle; (3) Mrázek likens Lossky’s notion of freedom in an organically interconnected society—to which Lossky attributes a higher substantial essence than to the substantial human “self”—to the totalitarian regimes of Marxism and Nazism. Such a notion would of course have been anathema to Lossky, who highlighted the monstrous consequences of those materialist political systems and promoted the ideal of Christianity in their place; (4) Finally, Mrázek objects to Lossky’s acceptance of *apokatastasis*, the ultimate orientation of all people to the good, which is again, he says, a denial of freedom. Considering all these contradictions, Mrázek suggests that in the final analysis Lossky’s teaching is simply “unacceptable.”<sup>24</sup>

Jaroslav Vokoun drew a comparison between Lossky and the catholic thinker Teilhard de Chardin,<sup>25</sup> largely because of Lossky’s positive view of evolution. But whereas Teilhard’s work was published posthumously, Lossky was able to face his opponents, present arguments for his conclusions, and become a “man of dialogue.” He was, for example, able to highlight “the core of some of the “postmodern phenomena” which today simply tend to be rejected out of hand.”<sup>26</sup> Vokoun is fascinated by Lossky’s dynamic view of an organically interconnected world and

<sup>23</sup> See Michaela Moravčíková’s review of *Nauka o reinkarnaci* in *Teologický časopis* 1 (2006): 80.

<sup>24</sup> Miloš Mrázek, “Pojetí svobody v Losského nauce o převtělování,” *Distance* 1 (2006): 75–82.

<sup>25</sup> Jaroslav Vokoun, “Pražský a bratislavský Teilhard – N. O. Losskij,” *Getsemany* 2 (1996): 30. See, for example, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*, trans. Sarah Appleton-Weber (Brighton: Sussex Academic, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

a Teilhardian “point Alpha,” the very beginning. Elsewhere, he presented Lossky’s (Orthodox) view of universal eschatological salvation and contrasted it with the protestant and catholic perspectives of, respectively, Barth and von Balthasar. Lossky allows for the ultimate salvation of all people, not through their “being carried over by God to eternal bliss”<sup>27</sup>—it is impossible to find joy in God through the free choice of evil—but through an evolutionary development by which “ultimately, the human person comes to know the tragedy of its own self-love and converts.”<sup>28</sup> In Lossky, the possibility of final conversion is not, furthermore, bound to a single earthly life: “As an Orthodox, Lossky does not see purgatory as a Latin version of reincarnation, but however much he tries to avoid it, the motif of reincarnation constantly returns in his work.”<sup>29</sup>

During the Second World War, Lossky lived and worked in Slovakia, and two of his books were published there after the Velvet Revolution. *Philosophy of Intuitivism*<sup>30</sup> carried an introduction by Peter Mornár on Lossky’s life and philosophical legacy;<sup>31</sup> Róbert Sarka introduced *On Mystical Intuition*<sup>32</sup> with a reflection on how Lossky’s mysticism relates to the mysticism of the Christian West.<sup>33</sup> The anonymous author (known only as “P.G.”) who reviewed *On Mystical Intuition* in one Slovak journal likened Lossky’s views to those of Berdyaev and expressed appreciation for how Lossky “[overcame] the intellectual limitations of European philosophy by defining mysticism-as-transcendental-knowledge as a gnoseological category.”<sup>34</sup>

Lossky’s work continues to be of interest in Slovakia, partly because of his contribution to ecumenism—in which he followed a similar line to Solovyov<sup>35</sup>—and partly because he is seen as a significant figure of twentieth-century philosophy. Ján Čipkár addressed five main themes in his

27 Jaroslav Vokoun, “Apokatastasis panton ekumenicky,” *Teologický sborník* 4 (1996): 66.

28 Ibid., 67.

29 Ibid.

30 Nikolay Lossky, *Filozofia intuitivizmu* (Poprad: Christiana, 2000).

31 Peter Mornár, “Dielo Nikolaja O. Losského – prvý originálny plod autoafirmácie ruského ducha,” in Lossky, *Filozofia intuitivizmu*, 9–29.

32 Nikolay Lossky, *O mystickej intuícii* (Poprad: Christiana, 2004).

33 Róbert Sarka, “Losského mystická intuícia v kontexte západnej kresťanskej mystiky,” in Lossky, *O mystickej intuícii*, 9–23.

34 See P. G.’s review of *O mystickej intuícii* in *Verbum* 2 (2006): 141. Lossky’s preferred term for what today is commonly called “epistemology” was “gnoseology.” The two are virtually interchangeable, but in deference to Lossky’s own use of the term, we have generally used gnoseology/gnoseological.

35 Ján Komorovský, “Ekumenizmus ruského náboženského filozofa Nikolaja Onufrieviča Losského,” *Verbum* 1 (1996): 50–54.

comprehensive volume on Lossky and the self-affirmation of the Russian spirit: Lossky's perspective on the history of philosophy according to his *History of Russian Philosophy*; the development of Lossky's gnoseology in *Foundations of Intuitivism*; an exploration of Lossky's *The World as an Organic Whole*; a summary of Lossky's teaching on free will; and Lossky's ethics.<sup>36</sup>

## The Aims and Methods of This Research

My interpretation of Lossky's life and legacy will adopt the methods of spiritual theology. The principal direction of the book is not, therefore, historical and philosophical—although I will make use of those disciplines—but spiritual and theological. I will use two main approaches, the *personalistic* and the *systematic*, and although the approaches are of course complementary, one will usually be more in focus than the other at any given point in the book.<sup>37</sup>

I will begin by exploring Lossky's life before he moved to Czechoslovakia. I will describe his spiritual development in the terms of his own retrospective interpretation and set his experience in the wider framework of a spiritual phenomenon that was not uncommon among the Russian intelligentsia, namely a drift away from faith in adolescence but a return to Christianity later in life. When speaking of the nature of Lossky's spiritual experience, my approach will be mostly *personalistic*. Lossky and his friends sought to review and describe the development of an inner life based on mystical knowledge, to grasp it anew, and to interpret it in the context of Christian orthodoxy. From this lived spirituality and later discernment, Lossky moved, ideologically, to more systematic philosophical-theological reflections, first seeking to defend the authenticity of "mystical intuition" as part of his gnoseology, but then shifting his focus to develop a systematic and integrated perspective on the spiritual evolution of all existence.

The next section will be more historical and will follow Lossky to Czechoslovakia. When the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia, Lossky was

<sup>36</sup> Ján Čipkár, N. O. Losskij vo filozofii 20. storočia. Pokus o reflexiu autoafirmácie ruského ducha (Košice: Univerzita Pavla Jozefa Šafárika, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> For more on the methods of spiritual theology, see, for example, Fr Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1980); Vojtěch Kohut, *Co je spirituální teologie?* (Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 2007).

forced aboard Lenin's "Philosophy Steamer," and with the help of Thomas G. Masaryk, the first president of the First Czechoslovak Republic, arrived in Prague, where his mystical worldview encountered an entirely different academic and spiritual milieu. He found many like-minded souls among the more metaphysically orientated philosophers and theologians, but his thinking also attracted fierce opponents among those who adhered to what was then the dominant positivist sociological and materialist view of the world.

I will approach the final two sections more *systematically*. The first of these will focus on Lossky's defence of "mystical intuition" in the context of various philosophical and theological positions. In Lossky's understanding of the world, and indeed generally in Russian thinking, the boundary between philosophy and theology, natural and supernatural knowledge, is highly porous. For Russian theologians, true natural knowledge can be attained only through inner illumination and transformation by the supernatural. Using works Lossky published in Czechoslovakia, I will begin my summary of Lossky's speculation concerning mystical intuition by analysing the nature of the mind and the need in mystical intuition for supernatural transformation. I will then move on to a systematic evaluation of Lossky's notion of mystical intuition from the perspective of modern-day spiritual theology. The second section will explore Lossky's notion of the spiritual development of a "person" or "personality." If the first part of the monograph observed this phenomenon from a personal perspective using an inductive approach, here, using a deductive approach, I will set Lossky's worldview in the context of various expressions of the evolution of nature and the human person. To introduce Lossky's system, I will use his spiritual-theological interpretation of characters from the novels of Fyodor Dostoyevsky. I will also discuss the spiritual-therapeutic context and the healing of the sick, and will conclude with a brief evaluation of one of the more problematic aspects of Lossky's mystical system, namely his distinctive teaching on reincarnation.

Lossky's work has been reflected on elsewhere,<sup>38</sup> especially—since the fall of communism—in Russia.<sup>39</sup> Our focal point, however, is his legacy in

38 In Latin, see for example, Jozef Papin, *Doctrina de bono perfecto: eiusque in systemate N. O. Losskij personalistico application* (Leiden: Brill, 1946); and in English, Mikhail Sergeev, *Sophiology in Russian Orthodoxy: Solov'ev, Bulgakov, Losskii and Berdiaev* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006).

39 Notable works in Russian include: Petr Borisovič Šalimov, "Н. О. Лосский как историк русской философии," diss. (Moscow, 1993); Elena Petrovna Borzova, *Николай Онуфриевич*