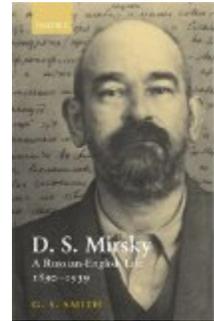


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

G. S. Smith. *D. S. Mirsky: A Russian-English Life, 1890-1939*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. xviii + 398 pp. \$110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-816006-9.

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A Sort of Life

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Born Prince Dimitry Petrovich Svyatopolk-Mirsky, D. S. Mirsky remains something of an enigma, although the author of this volume has contributed a great deal towards elucidating his life story. Of aristocratic pedigree, claiming descent from Riurik, both his grandfather and father also served the Tsarist state. Both rose to the rank of general in the Russian army. His father ended his career as Minister of the Interior in 1904-05. With that background, it is understandable that after attending the University of St. Petersburg Mirsky embarked upon a career as an army officer. He served against the German forces in World War I and in the ensuing Civil War with Denikin's White Army. After the collapse of White resistance in South Russia he was forced into emigration and resided in Western Europe until the early 1930s. Mirsky, however, was more than a typical army officer of his era. He was interested in and published mainly in the areas of Russian literary history and literary criticism. He knew quite well the great poets of his era, including Akhmatova, Mandelshtam, Pasternak and Tsvetaeva, although his own precociously published volume of verse was never to appear in his curriculum vitae. >From the early 1920s he emerged as a leading interpreter of Russian literature for an English-speaking audience and, in the 1930s, of English literature for a Russian audience.

For most of the 1920s Mirsky was an opponent of Marxism and Bolshevism. He was an idealist rather than a materialist, who considered serious literature—he de-

spised the “popular” variety—as being divorced from the socioeconomic structure in which it emerged. Instead literature changed within itself or between an emphasis on different forms, as between prose and poetry. Then in the very late 1920s, almost with the seeming speed with which Saul was transformed into Paul, he became a Marxist-Leninist and returned to the Soviet Union in 1932. Arrested in 1937, he died in a labour camp in Siberia in 1939.

In fact, as the author elaborates, Mirsky's metamorphosis into a Bolshevik by the end of the 1920s was a more drawn out and complex process than has been commonly supposed. By the summer of 1926, for various reasons, he had alienated most of the literary emigration and was convinced that a Russian literature could not survive outside of Russia, except perhaps as a subordinate strand. From 1926 he published mostly in English rather than emigre journals. Another factor was that from 1925 Mirsky became increasingly involved with the Eurasianist movement—a grouping that might be described as the “imperialist” successors of the Slavophiles of the nineteenth century, supporters of the notion that the Russian and other peoples occupying the vast region that became effectively the Soviet Union from 1922 belonged neither to Europe nor Asia. Within that context the Russians were considered the “civilisers” of the Steppe. Although the Eurasianists were a more-than-somewhat heterogeneous collection in their views, Mirsky's views did not always agree with those of the movement's leading figures on particular issues. Whereas Russian Orthodoxy was central to the movement as a whole, Mirsky was

never very religious. Although the tenor of the Eurasianists published work was antipathetic towards European culture, he devoted much of his working life to English literature. He described himself on one occasion as being “a Eurasian in even years and a European in odd ones”.

At the personal level, from the mid-1920s Mirsky developed a close personal relationship with P. S. Arapov, a leading Eurasianist publicist living in England who was actually a Soviet agent. Smith suggests that the meeting with Gorky in Sorrento at the end of 1927 was a turning point in his shift to Bolshevism and eventual move to the Soviet Union. Another influence was the Marxist economist Maurice Dobb, a name often raised in connection with the Cambridge Soviet espionage ring as the fourth and now (after Anthony Blunt) considered by some to have been the fifth “man”. Whereas Mirsky was not attracted by what he saw as the petty peasant capitalism of the New Economic Policy in the mid-1920s, he obviously became impressed with Soviet forced industrialisation beginning with the first five-year plan. He had in common with the Bolsheviks a distaste for liberal democracy, preferring instead the autocrat that Stalin increasingly became from the late 1920s. When the Eurasianist movement effectively collapsed in 1929, Mirsky moved more rapidly to Bolshevism.

The subtitle of this work might be considered somewhat misleading. Mirsky learnt English from childhood through English governesses, as did the Russian aristocracy and service nobility generally by the later nineteenth century. His intellectual reputation, in so far as it has lasted, is based essentially on his English-language publications on Russian literature, in particular his two volumes on the history of Russian literature. His residence in England from 1922 until 1932, however, was restricted essentially to the obligation to teach three ten-week terms at the University of London’s School of Slavonic and East European Studies. Otherwise, when that commitment was met he resided in France, usually catching the ferry to Dunkirk and Paris immediately after his last lecture and not returning until the night before his first lecture of the next term. He was arguably more at home in France, where surviving members of his family lived and where a much larger emigre Russian population resided. His emigre activities in the 1920s were essentially confined to Paris. He was otherwise a Fran-

cophile rather than an Anglophile. He travelled widely in France. In England he doesn’t seem to have ventured beyond the London suburb of Bloomsbury; except, that is, for trips to give lectures to provincial academic audiences and, in 1931, for the Friends of The Soviet Union.

The author is quite an admirer of Mirsky, at least until his work became “adulterated” by Marxism. This shows not only in the frequent use of words such as “brilliant” to describe many of his publications and in considering him a “legend”, but also in the effort that has been devoted to the subject. Mirsky was not the character that Malcolm Muggeridge based on him in his 1934 novel *Winter in Moscow*: “a man who’s managed to be a parasite under three regimes: Aristocrat under Tzarism, Professor under capitalism, Proletarian man-of-letters under the Dictatorship of the Proletariat”. Neither, however, was he as important a figure in Russian literary history as Smith at least implies him to be. A concluding chapter that assessed that role would have been useful, rather than one that is occupied by Mirsky’s arrest in 1937, subsequent interrogation, and sentencing to a labour camp where he died in mid-1939. This intimates that the author was at a loss to find an adequate ending for the story in place of the formal procedures, which are copiously quoted, involved in the actual ending of the life of the subject.

The author confuses the “Katkov lycee” in Moscow, where Mirsky received his secondary education, with the substantially more prestigious Imperial Alexander Lycee in St Petersburg (p. 33). The work includes incredible and largely irrelevant detail. For example, the reader for some reason is informed of two articles in *Eurasia*, a journal with which Mirsky was associated in the 1920s that “both managed to end on a hyphenated word on page 3 and continue on page 4” (p. 75). Mirsky’s lunch on 1 June 1900 comprised “green cabbage soup with eggs, *kasha* and *kulebyaka*, lamb, baked potatoes, and a pie” (p. 23). For his tenth birthday in August 1900 lunch consisted of “green cabbage soup again, chicken, corn and ice cream”. Yet the author regrets that material of similar insignificance is no longer extant. This early interest in food could perhaps have been related to Mirsky becoming quite a gourmand before he returned to the Soviet Union (as well as a copious imbiber of wines and spirits). In later life he came to share this reviewer’s intense distaste for that bland substance *kasha*.

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