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Roerich and the Fight for Culture¹

Abstract

In 1930, at the initiative of Nikolay Raynov², was founded the Bulgarian Roerich Society. This brief essay, written and published by Raynov in the Newspaper Zarya 1933, aims to introduce the oeuvre of Nicholas Roerich and his ideas of Pax Cultura – peace through culture – to a larger Bulgarian audience. Raynov argues that it is not enough to create oeuvres of art, i.e. to write books or to paint pictures, but that it is also necessary to fight for the protection of cultural works and monuments, especially in times of conflict and war. In this sense, this brief essay can be conceived as a call to the Bulgarian public to join the Roerich Pact, elaborated in 1928/1929.

Keywords: Nicholas Roerich, Art, Culture, Peace, Banner of Peace

Nowadays there are few all-round geniuses. Such personalities are unique. Nicholas Roerich is among them: painter, graphic designer, poet, archaeologist, historian, public figure, geographer, essayist, ethnographer, pedagogue, and philosopher. There are more than fifty branches of the famous Roerich Society, created not to glorify a man (no matter

¹ Published in Raynov 1933. All References are mine – Y.R.

² Nikolay Raynov (or Nikolai Rainov, 1889-1954) is a famous Bulgarian writer, poet, art historian, painter, ethnographer, archeologist, translator, theosophist, and philosopher. He graduated from Sofia Theological Seminary in 1908, studied also Philosophy, and graduated from National Academy of Arts in Sofia 1919. He served as war correspondent during World War I. In 1919 he travelled to the Syria, Egypt, and Palestine where he collected material for his writings. From 1922 Raynov worked as Librarian in Ivan Vazov National Library in Plovdiv until 1927 when he was appointed Professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Sofia. In 1922 he founded the 1923 he became Editor-in-Chief of the theosophical Journal "Orpheus", and President of the same-named theosophical lodge. From 1925-1927 he was on a Fellowship in France where he studied at the *Conservatoire des arts et métiers*, and attended also the philosophical courses of Henry Bergson. Raynov is co-founder and first director of the Institute for Literature at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. His first book "Bogomil Legends" () was highly praised, yet his novel "Between the desert and alive", which tells the story of Jesus, led to a public polemic, and he was excommunicated from the Orthodox Church. Raynov is author of 9 volumes on history of Bulgarian literature, 12 volumes of history of art, more than 40 novels and legends, and 30 volumes of fairy-tales from all over the world.

how great he is), but to work in accord with his perceptions of a universal human ideal. The New York City Roerich Museum attracts around 5,000,000 visitors annually. During the past ten years, Roerich established a series of educational institutions in America for the study of all arts: painting, sculpture, graphics, decorative art, applied arts, music, stage art, directing, and ballet. There are workshops, libraries, museums, theaters, lecture halls. The Banner of Peace, proposed by Roerich in order to fly over cultural buildings during the war, gained worldwide recognition at the Bruges congress two years ago. Out of bounds and nationalities, Roerich fights for the culture of humanity, heavily threatened at this terrible time. More than 2,000 paintings by this genius painter point out to the world the cultures of the peoples. Although a poet, Roerich is not a literary writer in his ornamental and pictorial works: he speaks with colors, lines and harmony in them, and so he captures at once.

Since several years, he lives in the Himalayas where he works. Kumar Haldar, one of the best Indian painters, notes: "The Himalayan Majesty is nowhere depicted as it is in Roerich's works." He depicts not only the Majesty of the Himalayas, but also of all humankind, which will overcome the Himalayas. From his corner in the highest mountains of the world, Roerich contemplates the cultural trajectory of humanity and finds nothing greater. One of his first books, *Flowers of Moriah's Garden*, contains intimate poems in which the poet's soul gradually approaches the innermost focal point of culture. In *Adamant and Path of Blessing*, he was able to sum up the cultures of the peoples in poetic fragments. And, in his latest books, *Altai-Himalaya*, *Heart of Asia*, *Shambhala*, and *Abode of Light*, he introduces us to his broad activities spreading the ideas of peace, mutual acquaintance and understanding, culture, and love for light.

In *Heart of Asia*, Roerich recounts his expedition through Mongolia. It helped him to accumulate a rich artistic and scientific groundwork during this difficult and dangerous undertaking that ended with the founding of the Himalayan Research Institute, which is already working with plenty of distinguished scientists. Jean Duvernoy wrote that, when a friend gave him that book of Roerich, he said to him: "It seems that this man is invincible, he spent five years in Asia, enduring Chinese and Tibetan captivity, and overcame all the extreme difficulties". The fruit of this exhausting journey is known: more than 500 paintings of Asian subjects and three books, all this by Roerich alone without counting the scientific research of his son.

However, the struggle for culture finds the most focused expression in *The Realm of Light*. It is a book about the human heart as the source of culture, because under "culture" Roerich does not understand the discovery of poisonous gases, neither football nor a raft-city, nor a doll-machine. The source of culture is love, nobleness, and honor. Culture is the sum of the most sublime manifestations of an individual and a collective person: that which

does not die. In this book, we see how many people and cultural associations work around the world for an ideal: from Finland to Japan, from France to Bulgaria, and from Latvia to Tahiti. No trace of fanaticism and sectarianism. Everything constructive and creative is encouraged.

One of the main institutions, established by the tireless activist for renewal of humanity, is the Institute of United Arts. On his coat of arms, you can clearly see Roerich's motto:

Art will unify all humanity. Art is one – indivisible. Art has its many branches, yet all are one. Art is the manifestation of the coming synthesis; art is for all. Everyone will enjoy true art. The gates of the 'sacred source' must be wide open for everybody, and the light of art will influence numerous hearts with a new love. At first this feeling will be unconscious, but after all it will purify human consciousness, and how many young hearts are searching for something real and beautiful! So give it to them. Bring art to the people – where it belongs. We should have not only museums, theaters, universities, public libraries, railway stations and hospitals, but even prisons decorated and beautified. Then we shall have no more prisons. (Roerich 1921, 326; cf. Corona Mundi 1924, 76)

Nicholas Roerich is a worshipper of culture. His language game is the following: "Cult-Ura" means "worship of light," because the Aryan word-root Ura signifies Light. And he outlines: "Erroneously, the idea of something supernatural, almost unattainable in the dusk of daily life is often connected with the concept of Culture. In truth, it is just the contrary. Culture as such will function essentially when it enters into each day of life and becomes the criterion of quality for all our actions." (Roerich 1933b, 181)

How does he suffer that the love for the books decreases!

Just now perhaps, the necessity of co-operation between reader and editor should be especially stressed. The financial crises reflect most of all upon the means and qualities of education. This is sad but true! As though, because of an economic crisis, one would receive indulgence for ignorance and savagery! Just at present, the world traverses an unprecedented and deeply-rooted material crisis. A crisis of over-production, a crisis of the lowering of quality. A crisis in the faith of the possibility of a better and brighter future. It occurs mainly because of the fact that many generations have already been trained to believe that the leading world power is the gold standard. But recalling the entire history of humanity, we know this is not so. Let us not be compelled to repeat again that the true *valuta* is the *valuta* of spiritual treasures, and the sources of these values without a doubt still remain in the books, written in many different languages, but which carry the one language of the spirit. (Roerich 1933a, 164)

A lot has been written about Roerich abroad, and the writings still increase. May this short note attract the attention of the Bulgarians to the work of this great cultural figure, whose multifaceted work stands above all praise, no matter how flattering it may be. We are happy to be the contemporaries of a genius with whom we can communicate.

Translated from the Bulgarian by Yvanka B. Raynova

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