Dominic Rubin, *The Life and Thought of Lev Karsavin: „Strength made perfect in weakness...”* (*On the Boundary of Two Worlds: Identity, Freedom, and Moral Imagination in the Baltics*). Amsterdam–New York: Rodopi, 2013. 480 p. ISBN 978-9042-036-46-8

Dominic Rubin, the author of the reviewed book, is a specialist in Hebrew language and linguistics, an investigator of religions, and the author of the book *Holy Russia, Sacred Israel: Jewish-Christian encounters in Russian religious thought*, who teaches a course on Russia and Eurasia at Dickinson College. From this, one can guess that the approach in this book to the phenomenal and ever more valued Russian historian and philosopher Lev Karsavin will not be that of a historian or philosopher, but of a scholar of religious studies.

Agreeing with the author, one can note that the life of Lev Platonovich Karsavin was indeed unusual: he was born in 1882 in the capital of the Russian Empire, St Petersburg, at whose university he reached the peak of his academic career. In 1922 the Bolshevik government expelled him, and he lived in Berlin and Paris. In 1928, instead of Oxford he chose Kaunas, a provincial town in an ‘ambiguous land’, in order to be closer to Russia, and, as the author points out, to live in a Catholic country that had not experienced ‘Roman-Germanic imperialism’ (p. 243). In 1940, he once again found himself in a Soviet-ruled state, and as a nonconformist in 1949 he ended up in the gulag, where he greeted the sunset of his life. A Russian intellectual ‘man of paradoxes’ through his grandmother Anna Chomiakova, Karsavin had kinship ties with the Paleologue family of the last Byzantine emperors. He preserved his pre-revolutionary way of thinking, in his life story he recorded a ‘Lithuanian saga’ and a short career (although not very successful) as a Soviet academic, and also in the 1920s he was the main theorist of the Eurasian movement.

The book consists of seven chapters. In ‘The Making of a Metaphysical Historian’, about Karsavin’s place among other Russian exile thinkers, the early years of his life and his first scholarly papers are described, of which the most important one is ‘The Foundations of Medieval Religiosity’. In the chapter ‘A Theology Unfolds’, the theological works devoted to revealing the relationship and essence between Catholicism and Orthodoxy are discussed, and the influence of the 14th-century theologian Nicolaus Cusanus on the formation of Karsavin’s ‘unity of everything’ philosophy. In the chapter ‘The Flames of Love and Knowledge’, Karsavin’s first encounter with the Bolshevik regime and his first years in exile (1922–1924)

are presented. Also in many places in the book, the medievalist Elena Skrzhyanskaya is mentioned. Karsavin's affair with her is like the 'nail' of the whole book: the influence of his feelings for her on his poetic and philosophical works is analysed. This is original and unusual, because usually the scholarly biography of scholars is separated from the personal life; apparently here the author took into account Karsavin's already mentioned 'the unity of everything' principle. The chapter 'The Symphonic Face of Lev Karsavin: From History to Politics' analyses the later years of his exile (1924–1926), his work *Istorijos filosofija* [The Philosophy of History], and his relations with the Eurasian movement. In the chapter 'Personhood as the True Countenance of Being', the life and works of Karsavin in Lithuania are described, the most important of which was *Europos kultūros istorija* [The History of European Culture]. The chapter 'Strength Made Perfect in Weakness...' describes Karsavin's life and work 'from occupation to occupation' (1940–1949), and the last years of his life in the remote Abez labour camp (1950–1952), based on the memoirs of Anatolii Vaneyev. The book finishes with 'Epilogue: Karsavin Today', in which Karsavin's philosophical views are again compared to the concepts of other Eastern and Western philosophers. The author devotes much space to the differences and similarities of Karsavin's methodological affinity with the philosophies of other famous Russian philosophers and 'Eurasians', Nicolas Berdyaev, Vladimir Solovyov, Sergei Bulgakov, George Florovski, Pavel Florensky and Nikolai Lossky.

A supplement to the book is Karsavin's poetic work created in 1931 'Death Poem'.

As a historian and philosopher, Karsavin managed to outrun time. The book reveals the young scientist's conflict on historical methodological beliefs with his teacher Ivan Grevs, who did not understand what his former student called 'a static history', dedicating a lot of criticism to it because he was a practitioner of the traditional history of 'events and institutions'. The author points out that the 'poetic impressionism' of Karsavin's history studies, using the concepts of 'symphonic personality', 'average person' and 'religious foundation', is similar not only to the anthropological concepts of Claude Levi-Strauss, but also to the later studies of the history of mentalities developed by the French 'Annals' school medievalists (p. 43). Moreover, the author observes that in 'The History of European Culture', Karsavin did not see progress taking place in the Renaissance (p. 316), compared with the earlier medieval period. With this approach and focus on long-term collective mental structures, he drew closer to the 'Annals' school and the much later works of Georges Duby and Jacques Le Goff.

The language barrier prevented the author from becoming acquainted with the four other volumes of 'The History of European Culture', and the works of Lithuania's historians and philosophers. On the other hand, the latter have not published many of their works in other languages. This

problem still exists. For example, the author was able to use only one article by Povilas Lasinskas in the Russian language.¹ By the way, the Lithuanian works of Karsavin published before the war in Kaunas were seen not only in the press in the West, but also in that of intellectual Russian émigrés. Lasinskas published the relatively small-scale (p. 216) book *Levo Karsavino fenomenas*² [The Phenomenon of Lev Karsavin], in which attention is devoted to the major historical works of Karsavin, and in particular his academic activities in Lithuania. In the monograph by Lasinskas, for the first time the creative biography, scholarly attitudes and the most important works of this thinker are comprehensively investigated. Some of the works mentioned by Lasinskas have so far not been published, such as the study 'The History of Metaphysics' preserved in the Manuscript Department of the Lithuanian National Martynas Mažvydas Library. In fact, the author of the review failed to find a study with such a name, but the library has the 519-page draft of the work 'History and the Science of Christians'.³ One can surmise that perhaps financial considerations prevented the author of the book being reviewed from following the tradition of writers and scholars, and visiting the places where Karsavin lived, searching for unpublished documents. In the reviewed book, there is only one portrait of Lev Karsavin, the photograph on the book's cover, taken from Wikipedia.

In his book, Lasinskas reviews the Lithuanian 'Karsaviniana', the works by philosophers published in the Soviet era: Bronius Genzelis, publications and a text about the last works of Karsavin written in Abeze,⁴ the introduction by I. Tamošiūnienė on the ontological grounds of the ethical beliefs of Karsavin,⁵ the thoughts of Arūnas Sverdiolas about Karsavin's historical concept of existence,⁶ and finally, the review prepared by Traidenis Raudeliūnas of the 'Eurasian' works of Karsavin, in which he appropriately calls Karsavin a 'marginal figure' from both a geographical and a cultural point of view.⁷ The author of the reviewed book, one can assume, did not have an opportunity to become acquainted with *Levo Karsavino fenomenas* by Lasinskas. This book does not have

¹ P. Lasinskas, *Litovskii period zhizni i deyatelnosti L'va Platonovicha Karsavina, Diaspora. Nove materialy* 6 (2004), pp. 591–619.

² P. Lasinskas, *Levo Karsavino fenomenas* (Vilnius, 2009).

³ LNMMB Rankraščių skyrius, f. 56, b. 1.

⁴ B. Genzelis, *Paskutinieji Levo Karsavino darbai. Laikas ir idėjos* (Vilnius, 1980), pp. 222–234.

⁵ I. Tamošiūnienė, 'L. Karsavino etinių pažiūrų ontologiniai pagrindai', *Problemos*, 27 (1982), pp. 65–71.

⁶ A. Sverdiolas, *Kultūros filosofija Lietuvoje* (Vilnius, 1983), pp. 140–147.

⁷ T. Raudeliūnas, 'Istorijos procesas ir jo subjektas „visuotinybės“ ontologijoje', *Problemos*, 38 (1988), pp. 63–75.

a summary in English, but it was published in Russian with an English summary two years ago in Moscow.⁸

The Lasinskas monograph even has a separate chapter on the similarity of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* and the life and civilisation concepts of Karsavin not mentioned by the reviewed book's author. Spengler had fallen out with Hitler's regime, and died in poverty. Both Karsavin and Spengler will undoubtedly be assigned to the last generation of the new age's universal personalities whose tragic fates marked the sunset of values in the middle of the 20th century.⁹ However, it should be noted that Karsavin in his *Istorijos teorija* [Theory of History] said that 'Spengler of course, is an extremely gifted historian, but he uses second and third-hand material, and is not known for his scholarly integrity. Theoretically and philosophically, Spengler is naive and helpless'.¹⁰ In the opinion of Lasinskas, Karsavin here, as a supporter of V. Solovyov's 'unity of all things' theory, criticised Spengler's thesis on cultural insularity.¹¹

At the end of the review, here are a few minor additions. For example, we might ask, what was Karsavin's relationship with the 'fashionable' nationalist ideologies in Europe in the 1930s? In this case, he again applied the same 'unity of all things' principle: he considered land (territory), the inhabitants of the land (nation), and their political-social order (government) as single individual, parts of a single entity necessary for any nation. In a 1934 article in the journal *Židinys* about the state and the crisis of democracy, he noted that 'of course, a shared common destiny and blood also form the nation. But there is no need in a Hitlerian manner to exaggerate this common origin, regardless of how the *Rassentheorie* would satisfy the hot-blooded nationalists'.¹² In the memoirs of Anatolii Vaneyev 'Two years in Abez' cited by Rubin, the mentioned physics professor offering analogies of physics and metaphysics (pp. 345–346) was the Vilnius University professor, dean of the physics and mathematics department in 1944–1945, Antanas Žvironas.¹³

In the last chapter of the reviewed book 'Epilogue: Karsavin Today', the question how Lev Karsavin is immortalised in Lithuania's cultural memory would be appropriate. There is a high school in Vilnius bearing his name; on the house on Didžioji Street where he lived in 1940–1947, there is a commemorative plaque. There have been many 'Lev Karsavin readings'. The first, 'Lev Karsavin – Historian, Philosopher, Theologian',

⁸ P. Lasinskas, *Lev Karsavin. Universal'naia lichnost' v kontekstakh evropeiskoi kul'tury*, (Moscow, 2011).

⁹ Lasinskas, *Levo Karsavino fenomenas*, p. 98.

¹⁰ L. Karsavinas, *Istorijos teorija* (Kaunas, 1929), p. 67.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 108.

¹² L. Karsavinas, 'Valstybės ir demokratijos krizė', *Židinys* (1934), nr. 5–6, p. 434.

¹³ A. Vanejev, 'Dveji metai Abezėje, Leonas Karsavinas', *Europos kultūros istorija*, t. 3: *Kova dėl dievo karalystės ir tautinės valstybės* (Vilnius, 1994), p. 4.

took place in April 1991 at the National Martynas Mažvydas Library; the second, 'Lev Karsavin – Western European Cultural Historian and Philosopher', at Vilnius University in December 1997; the third, 'Christianity and Culture: The Conception and Interpretations of L.P. Karsavin', at Vilnius University in February 2000; the fourth, 'Lev Karsavin's Heritage and European Cultural Identity', at Vilnius and Vytautas Magnus Universities in Vilnius and Kaunas in December 2002; and the fifth, 'Universal Personality in the Contexts of European Culture', at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas in December 2007.

The author has succeeded in revealing the complex phenomenon of Lev Karsavin significantly more broadly than other researchers, and in giving the Western reader a comprehensive 'portrait' of his life, works and philosophical convictions. A great benefit of Dominic Rubin's book is that he compares Karsavin with the legacy of other Russian and West European thinkers of that time. On the other hand, the repeatedly mentioned Lithuanian researcher drew attention to the paradoxical situation that the greatest work by Karsavin, 'The History of European Culture', is by far one of the least explored.¹⁴

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¹⁴ P. Lasinskas, *Levo Karsavino fenomenas*, p. 19.