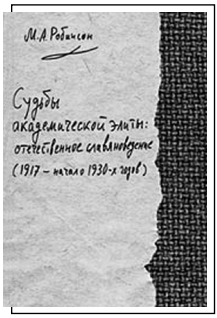

Mikhail Robinson. *Sud'by akademicheskoi elity: Otechestvennoe slavianovedenie (1917 — nachalo 1930-x godov)*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo 'Indrik', 2004. 432 pp.

Literary Academia under Soviet Power

Mikhail Robinson's book studies the generation of Russian Slavists established professionally before the Revolution, but continuing to work under the Soviets and experiencing a traumatic transformation of their scholarly institution. The period examined is the first decade and a half of Soviet rule and the monograph focuses on the struggle for survival of a scholarly community whose entire mode of existence — social as well as intellectual — was stripped down to its bare foundations.

The study is based on a large (if inevitably fragmentary) correspondence of around 60 scholars (mostly Slavists), and the nature of this source in many ways determines the vantage point from which we are presented the 'academic elite' of this era. Robinson highlights the significance of this informal type of communication among colleagues, who came to see themselves as 'comrades in arms' even in cases where they happened to be bitter academic opponents and had little else in common apart from their professional connections and a shared sense of be-

longing to a historically unique scholarly generation. Robinson is especially keen to reveal *the people* behind the well-known academic names and ranks, and he achieves this extremely well by weaving his narrative around continuous direct quotations from scholars' letters. The humanity of Robinson's subjects is unveiled both in the informal register through which the scholars speak and in the actual content of their epistolary exchanges, which expose above all else this elite's *anxieties of everyday life*.

In addition to the problem of basic physical survival (feeding one's family and securing adequate heating during winter), the shock of unprecedented economic difficulties clearly affected the scholars' identity as intellectuals by vocation and their perception of their 'proper' place in society. In a different way, the constant unpredictable moves to and from the provinces, as well as the splitting of this academic group between those who had emigrated (mostly to neighbouring Slavic countries) and those who preferred to remain in Soviet Russia, caused further dislocation and fragmentation of professional priorities, routines, hierarchies and identities within the collective. A prevailing sense of powerlessness resulted not just from the chaos of social turmoil or from the loss of professional rights, but also from the scaling down, in the new political circumstances, of the academic elite's sense of general social responsibility.

Yet Robinson's account of this generation is ultimately one of coping and survival rather than defeat and desperation. Hunger, suffered by all in the first years after the Revolution, only reinforced a sense of community among these scholars, instigating informal initiatives to send provisions to colleagues who were the most in need. The constant underlying panic about falling victim to random state terror usually went hand in hand with the busy activity of trying to assist friends who had ended up in such a predicament by pulling the few 'strings' that some members of this collective still had at their disposal. Similarly, the sense of doom at the radical reforms (for which read, purges) of academic establishments was invariably balanced by scathing and sarcastic private dismissals of the reigning 'Marxist' ideological fetishes and methodological fads (e.g. Marrism, Pokrovskyism, sociologism) propounded by the new authorities and the 'red' professoriate. Robinson also emphasises the remarkable (Quixotic) persistence of this 'old guard' in dutifully carrying on with their labours, trying to fulfil their academic responsibilities and preserve as much as possible certain established scholarly traditions, despite material obstacles, institutional frustrations and onslaughts of illness and depression.

Robinson does not explicitly analyse the rhetoric of the correspondence that serves as his source, but (in ethnographic fashion) allows his subjects to 'speak for themselves'. Particularly interesting in this

rich, mosaic-like, polyphony of voices is the odd intermixing, often in a single breath, of old-woman-like moans about exorbitant black-market prices and aching aged bodies, and the boyishly excited 'shop talk' about new research endeavours or a fortunate resurfacing of some rare manuscript collection. Yet despite cheery (albeit ironic) remarks about the variety of daily activities that had become a regular part of every academic's life (such as chopping firewood or dragging heavy buckets of water up the stairs) the fact that scholars were forced to engage in the physically draining matter of pure material survival was regularly interpreted by this community as an irresponsible 'waste of resources' that had sent to a premature grave many an irreplaceable brain. Extremely valuable is also Robinson's depiction of the internal workings of some key relations within this academic community in the semi-personal semi-professional correspondence between 'the masters' and 'the disciples'. His analysis reveals the intricate mechanisms of academic patronage and the forging of academic 'schools' and 'families', paralleling official learned institutions that were being subjected to such unpredictable ideological restructurings.

Robinson's book is of course not just about Slavic Studies. Although students of the history of Slavonic philology in Russia will no doubt find in this monograph the most detailed account to date of this discipline's fate in the early Soviet era, the disciplinary specificity of this academic field fades behind a more general study of a 'fallen' scholarly elite, for which the network of Slavists is just a telling case-study. Robinson is not the first to examine the fate of the pre-Revolutionary academic intelligentsia in the Soviet 1920s–30s, but the originality of his approach (foregrounding the patchwork of personal correspondence in all its linguistic and empirical richness) represents an indispensable complement to existing historical studies of a more sociological and political bent.

Andy Byford