THE FATE OF ONE FORGOTTEN IDEA: N. A. VASILIEV AND HIS IMAGINARY LOGIC

The fate of scientific ideas is whimsical. Very often time only gives us the opportunity to appraise the strength of forecasting of the scholar, the scale of his ideas, their orientation to the future, and the role and place of the scholar in the intellectual history of mankind. As one aphorism put it: “Time has a difficult delivery, but never a miscarriage” (F. R. Lamenne).

Today, the significance of the logical works — only a few articles — of Kazan University philosophy professor, N. A. Vasiliev (1880—1940), is becoming ever more apparent. He was the first to introduce considerations of inconsistency into formal logic, manifesting at that time an understanding of dialectical spirit (in Kant’s or Hegel’s sense).

In his early years, Vasiliev was attracted to poetry. As if predicting the fate of his own logical ideas, he wrote: “We are the quickly dying flame. And again a burning fire”.

Actually, his ideas, expressed at the very beginning of the 20th century, entitle us to call Vasiliev a thinker who anticipated the development of many parts of contemporary non-classical logic, especially its most pioneering and novel parts. Already in 1910 Vasiliev abandoned the law of contradiction and constructed a logic without this law. That is why he is justifiably considered as a forerunner of para-consistent logic, which incarnates the idea of non-Aristotelian logic. Through his critique (and rejection) of the law of excluded middle, Vasiliev anticipated the birth of another alternative to classical logic, viz., intuitionist logic. Moreover, due to introduction of new classes of judgements (and, respectively, new meanings of truth) he may be viewed as the predecessor of many — valued logic, which expanded the capability of classical logic. All of this enables us to compare *cum grano salis* the role of Vasiliev in logic with that of N. I. Lobachevsky in geometry: Lobachevsky’s ideas gave rise to non-Euclidian, non-classical geometry; Vasiliev’s ideas gave rise to non-Aristotelian, non-classical logic. Lobachevsky called his geometry “imaginary”; Vasiliev, too,
called his logic "imaginary." Lobachevsky opened new horizons in the development of mathematics; Vasiliev, as well, opened qualitatively new perspectives in the development of formal logic, especially regarding the treatment of contradictory statements. Even though there were no new ideas in Vasiliev's logic, he is worthy of close study as one of the most original and prominent Russian logicians.

A close look at Vasiliev's life and work shows us that he is not only the founder of original non-classical logical theories, but a thinker with very wide interests — philosopher, ethician, psychologist, historian, poet and even skilled interpreter. At present, Vasiliev, as a logician, is becoming more popular;¹ his non-logical studies have remained almost unknown and the biographical data consisted only of a short — ten lines — review in the Filosofskaja enciklopedija. Nevertheless, as a scientist Vasiliev attracted the attention of those logicians and mathematicians who independently arrived at similar ideas and tried to construct theories without laws of the excluded middle or the law of contradiction and who were interested in the history of psychology, ethics, symbolist poetry in the first quarter of the 20th century in Russia. Some scholars worked diligently but unsuccessfully to find the archives of the Vasiliev family (for instance, A. I. Mal'čev). I too engaged in this search, and was fortunate to find two of his logical manuscripts and the "remains" of archives (diary, letters, photographs, books with Vasiliev's annotations, etc.). This material enabled me to write a scientific biography of Vasiliev and study his way to imaginary logic.²

Genealogy. We know that Vasiliev's ancestor, Baron von Ixule, came to Russia in 1545 and was baptised in the Russian Orthodox Church with the name, Fedor Ivanovich. We next encounter his grandson, Alexei Sokovnin, who was executed with the great grandfather of A. S. Pushkin, Boyarynia (Baron) Morozova, for his part in the plot against Peter I. The closest relatives of N. A. Vasiliev also left their mark on Russian culture. His grandfather — Vasily P. Vasiliev (1818—1900) — prominent sinologist, was a full member of the Petersburg Academy of Sciences. One of his sons — Nicolai (1857—1920) —, a well-known Social-Democrat, was a close comrade-in-arms of G. V. Plekhanov. The eldest son — Alexander (1853—1929), the father of Nicolai A. Vasiliev, was a prominent mathematician, the founder of the Kazan physico-mathematical society and its first Chairman. A professor, and