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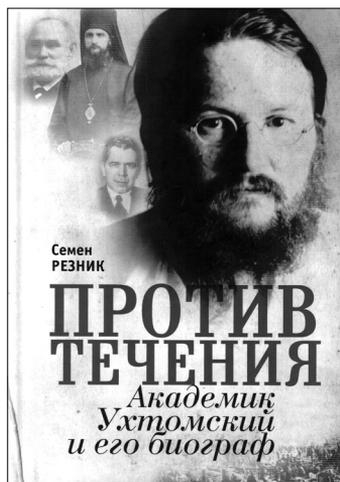
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Challenging Destiny

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The title and the subtitle of this book¹ are equally important. Both protagonists — the great physiologist Aleksey Alekseevich Ukhtomsky (1875–1942) and his pupil Vasilii Lavrent’evich Merkulov (1908–1980), an outstanding specialist in the history of science, constantly remain at the center of the author’s attention. Both had, to use a journalistic cliché, dramatic, even heroic biographies. Those grandiloquent words (at least in this case) mean that all life long both were harassed, starved, and made to say, write, or do what they did not want to say, write, or do. Though pariahs of the Soviet regime, they stubbornly went their way. Ukhtomsky left a lasting imprint on scholarship and even became an academician (although it was the highest rank in the hierarchy of Soviet science, as is well known, it did not guarantee safety), while Merkulov spent twenty years in GULAG (the fate that Ukhtomsky avoided only by the caprice of the powers that be) and

never saw his most important books in print, including the enlarged, uncensored biography of his teacher. He died marginalized and destitute, almost in poverty. His support (dismally meager support) came, to quote his own ironic statement, from his amputated leg, that is, from

¹ On: Semen Reznik, *Against the Current. Academician Ukhtomsky and his Biographer: A Documentary Saga with the Memoirist’s Autobiographical Digressions*. St. Petersburg: Aleteia, 2015. P. 363, with multiple illustrations.

the pension he received as an invalid. He injured his leg in the camp, and only his knowledge of medicine saved him from gangrene and death.

Like all Reznik's books, *Against the Current* at once rivets the readers' attention and keeps them in suspense to the end. To be sure, the plot is anything but trivial: genius against villainy, the Walpurgis Night of the academic sessions (the pogroms of biology and medicine), wars, and GULAG. The figures in the background are also memorable: Ukhtomsky's brother Alexander, who was consecrated bishop at the height of the antireligious hysteria; Chiang Ching-kuo, Chiang Kai-shek's son, a student at a Communist School (officially known as the University of the Working People of China), a vociferous youth, his father's passionate detractor and later his fellow-in-arms; Ivan Pavlov, another great physiologist and a bitter opponent of the Bolsheviks, an alumnus of the Theological Seminary, who a short time before his death proposed a toast to experimenters, including social experimenters, that is, the people who performed vivisection on the victims in their grip.

And next to them we find a swarm of Marxists, from an apparatchik like L.L. Averbakh, who perished either under torture or in a Soviet concentration camp, to the party-supported academician A.M. Deborin. The latter, to quote Molotov, imagined that he was a Soviet Engels (though everybody knew that the slot had been occupied once and for all); after his short-lived triumph he was thrown out of heaven. To him and to the true-blue orthodox literary scholar V.F. Pereverzev an inconceivable deviation, namely Menshevik idealism, was imputed. For some reason, Deborin avoided arrest and even kept his rank, but party eagles kept busy eating his liver day and night. Side by side with them stands the gigantic figure of the "people's academician", the unforgettable (and, as Reznik keeps reminding us, unforgotten) Trofim Denisovich Lysenko, who, following the tyrant's nod, plunged Soviet biology and related areas of knowledge into medieval darkness. And then a feeble renaissance arrived, spells of frost began to alternate with thaws, and it turned out that the Bolsheviks had attained their goal: they did create a new breed of *Homo sapiens*. Those who survived the plague confirmed this circumstance, while the citizens of the post-Soviet era proved it beyond any reasonable doubt.

I have often asked myself what determines the constant success of Reznik's books. Some answers suggest themselves at once. Reznik is a born story-teller, a master of all stylistic registers, an author who never loses sight of the whole. An ironic commentary alternates in his works with business prose and lyric descriptions. He knows his facts inside out. Each date mentioned in the sources has been checked and verified, and yet, despite this minute attention to detail, he never allows digressions to run away with him. Not a single of his books has been written in a hurry, with a deadline in view. Each of them, whether on the history of the Jewry or the history of science, had a gestation period that took years. He avoids a condescending attitude toward unprepared readers, for he does not despise them for their ignorance; nor does he deliver lectures to professors, in whose presence he, incidentally, does not feel overawed.

A successful biographer needs one more quality, and Reznik possesses it in full measure: he never stands aloof from his characters. He writes about each of them, as he could have written about an intimate acquaintance, with sympathy, joy, and indignation coming to the surface unconcealed. In this book, the element of involvement is especially strong. Merkulov is not a mere figure from the past. Reznik exchanged letters with him for years and met him more than once. Their correspondence is constantly quoted in the text. Let us not forget that *Against the Current* is a saga with "the memoirist's autobiographical digressions".

It is common knowledge that Soviet life obeyed the law of "the first people". Three founders of Marxism domineered in all spheres (the fourth vacancy proved to be temporary and was filled as needed). There was "the founder of the party and the Soviet state," whose principal

successor incorporated that dead but immortal leader. And of course there were the first poet (Pushkin, then Mayakovsky), the first composer (Tchaikovsky), the first painter (Repin), and, the main point in our case, the first physiologist (Pavlov), whom those in power tamed in the end, though with moderate success. Ukhtomsky was not Pavlov's opponent; he was different, a stance not admitted or, to say the least, not encouraged. He was also "different" on many other accounts, for he belonged to one of the great ancient aristocratic Russian families, graduated from the Theological (rather than the Communist) Academy, did not renounce his religion, remained a regular and active church goer, and made no secret of his habits and convictions. In everything else he was also unlike those around him. A tall, handsome, and kind-hearted man, he did not avoid women's society but never married, and it was not for nothing that he called himself a worldly monk. "...he came to the conclusion that to develop an outlook which would give justice to both the soul and the body he had to become a physiologist" (p. 70).

His teacher was N.E. Vvedensky, an outstanding researcher, and the very opposite of Ukhtomsky in personal appearance, character, and temperament. Under the influence of Chernyshevsky and Pisarev's liberal, even revolutionary, ideas, he joined the Narodniks (a populist movement whose adherents "went to the people" and agitated against social injustice) and spent three years in solitary confinement, but was acquitted, and later "went" to worthier quarters, namely to I.M. Sechenov, "the father of Russian physiology". Despite such a tempestuous youth, "not long before his death, while looking back on his past, Nikolai Evgen'evich said to Ukhtomsky: 'One can say that I have spent all my life in the company of the nervous-muscular preparation'" (p. 110).

The mainstay of Ukhtomsky's theory is the principle of the dominant. This is the gist of the theory, as Reznik presented it in a letter to Merkulov:

In my opinion, Ukhtomsky was one of the greatest people of the twentieth century, and his theory of the dominant, in the broad philosophical and ethical aspect as he understood it, was one of mankind's greatest breakthroughs, along with Niels Bohr's principle of complementarity. Up until now this principle has been used only in physics, though Bohr interpreted it more broadly and considered it a most important philosophical principle. I understand it as meaning that in studying any phenomenon or object we *are unable* to reach an adequate appreciation of this phenomenon or object, because the process of cognition presupposes an initial choice of a certain point of view or perspective. The principle of complementarity resolves itself into observing an object from one perspective, while realizing the limitation of the obtained picture and attempting to look at it again from an entirely different point of view. Only such 'complementarity' secures more or less adequate results. I believe that the dominant puts this principle on a psycho-physiological foundation. Ukhtomsky's idea that man lives in the world circumscribed by his dominants, that our idea of the world is at cross-purposes with that world, and that, consequently, the world can be understood only through the interlocutor, that is, through an individual representing another point of view and having different dominants — this is such a stroke of genius that it will be fully understood in a hundred years or so. What you write about Dostoevsky's influence on Ukhtomsky is very important and interesting, though, to my mind, here too the dominant was in play, that is, Ukhtomsky found in Dostoevsky what he wanted to find in him (p. 160–161).

As we can see, in Reznik's opinion, Ukhtomsky's theory of the dominant and Niels Bohr's principle of complementarity share several common features. Merkulov thought this idea is worthy of every consideration (pp. 160–163). I can add that the concept of the dominant also influenced the views of some of Ukhtomsky's contemporaries in the humanities. For example, it played a not insignificant role in the studies of the literary school known as Russian Formal-

ism. It seems to have originated in German aesthetics, but its roots can perhaps be detected in the philosophy of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. The concept could be well-known to the polymaths of that time.

On the cover of Reznik's book we see four portraits (in the text there are many more excellent illustrations); Ukhtomsky, still relatively young, is given close-up. Against him, his indomitable brother Alexander in bishop's vestment, Sergei Vavilov (who was made the president of the Soviet Academy of Sciences three years after his great brother Nikolai perished in prison), and Pavlov appear. Their lives ran different courses, but it was their lot to be born at the cruelest time of recent Russian history and suffer with the people subjected to inhuman social engineering.

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