

Rostovtzeff and the classical origins of Eurasianism

CASPAR MEYER

... the tortuous road of history
thus led the Russians from Mithraism
through Christianity to Marxism.

George Vernadsky, *The origins of
Russia* (Oxford, 1959) vi.

THE INTRODUCTORY QUOTE, from a book preface by one of the most prolific Russian historians of the twentieth century, speaks to an eccentric conception of history, even by the standards of aphoristic wisdom¹. In George Vladimirovich Vernadsky's (1887-1973) interpretation Russia had evolved through a threefold developmental sequence of epochs defined by a dominant belief system of unequal and (lately) declining character. That Marxism was strictly a belief, and a fanatic aberrant one at that, is an unsurprising view for an émigré scholar writing in the United States of the McCarthy era. More difficult to explain is the alleged link between Russia and Mithraism, an Orientalizing religious movement unattested outside the Roman empire or Roman-occupied areas of the ancient world.

Vernadsky's statement is a précis of the argument deployed in his book as much as a personalized motto of his school's peculiar brand of historiography, known as

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