

# The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library

## Four Lectures on Russian Historicism

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## Four Lectures on Russian Historicism

Isaiah Berlin spoke on this subject on at least four occasions between 1962 and 1973. His (extempore) words on all four occasions have been preserved, and are transcribed below.

On 12 December 1962 the Russian Research Center at Harvard hosted a talk and discussion on **'The Addiction of Russian Intellectuals to Historicism'**, which was transcribed by a stenographer but not recorded. **'The Russian Preoccupation with Historicism'** was a lecture given and **recorded** at the University of Sussex (whose library holds the original recording) in 1967. Next, Berlin delivered the second Dal Grauer Memorial Lecture, **'The Russian Obsession with History and Historicism'**, at Totem Park, University of British Columbia, on 2 March 1971: the **recording** is of patchy quality.<sup>1</sup> Finally, there was a BBC talk, **'The Russian Preoccupation with History'**, recorded on 14 December 1973, transmitted on Radio 3 on 24 July 1974 and 17 March 1975, and on 29 October 1975 by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation as 'The Russian Obsession with History': the **recording** is the clearest of the three that survive. None of these versions was published by Berlin, though this very short extract from the BBC talk appeared in the *Listener*:

Sir Isaiah Berlin spoke of the concern for 'History' manifested by nineteenth-century and twentieth-century Russians – and, comparably, by developing nations in Asia and Africa: 'There obviously is some deep connection between being technologically inferior and looking to history to see what one can do. In some way, history offers a prop. It offers some kind of encouragement to proceed in a certain direction, which successful societies don't

<sup>1</sup> In particular, there are some gaps and garblings which have required conjectural restoration. Material currently inaudible to the editor is shown as bracketed ellipses: [...]. If any reader/ listener can suggest improvements (to this transcript or the others), **the editor** will be grateful to be informed. Thanks to Adrian Kreuzspiegel for help already given.

## FOUR LECTURES ON RUSSIAN HISTORICISM

feel because they can simply ask themselves what is the rational thing to do, without particularly bothering about alleged patterns to which they look as some kind of salvation.<sup>2</sup>

### *Acknowledgements*

Grateful thanks to those who helped with the provision and digitisation of recordings, with background information, and by offering other forms of support, in particular: at Harvard, Svetlana Rukhelman; at Sussex, Matthew Platts and Karen Watson; at UBC, Candice Bjur and (from Lifetime Heritage Films) John Romein.

<sup>2</sup> 'History', in 'Out of the Year', *Listener*, 19 and 26 December 1974, 830.

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# The Addiction of Russian Intellectuals to Historicism

(Harvard 1962)

MERLE FAINSDOD I think we might start. One of these days we're going to get a speaker who needs an introduction. Sir Isaiah Berlin doesn't. He's an old friend of ours. Indeed he was here when we were going through our early birth pangs, and we found his presence, as always, extremely stimulating. I know of few people who have his range of erudition and his penetration, and I know no one who carries that weight of erudition with as light a touch. Today he's going to talk to us about Russian intellectuals and their addiction to historicism. And so, without more ado, Sir Isaiah.

ISAIAH BERLIN The subject of this talk arises out of Professor Pipes's ideas. He asked me what I thought the Russian intelligentsia made of history, a subject which I had never asked myself about before. I'm not a historian, and I'm not really so erudite as our chairman has so generously suggested; I'm grateful for his praise, but I think perhaps I don't deserve it; on the other hand, to get more than one's due is much more agreeable than getting one's due. At any rate, I began thinking about this topic and came to the conclusion, which may be unsound (and if it is, I hope it will come out in the discussion), that:

THE RUSSIAN INTELLIGENTSIA, or its leaders in the nineteenth century – men whose ideas contributed vastly to making the Russian Revolution what it was – were not principally interested in history as historians are interested in it, or as ordinary students of it are; what absorbed their attention was the problem of laws of history, patterns of history – historicism, that is to say – for they looked to history more or less as a substitute for metaphysics or religion. They looked to history for a theodicy, for a justification of their own lives, and those of mankind at large, and they hoped to find in it a pattern which they might follow – rules, goals, ways of life, answers to the torturing questions, social and personal, with which they were afflicted.

By way of setting this topic in its context, let me begin by propounding some propositions which appear to me to be truisms – perhaps because I have believed in them so long myself – but which may turn out to be exaggerated or faulty.

The first of these propositions is that scarcely any major ideas in the field either of the humanities or of social thought have sprung from Russian soil. There is, I suppose, an exception to this generalisation in the case of the *mir*, of the addiction to the principles of *obshchinnost'* and *sobornost'*, of the Slavophil and populist faith in the ethos of village *Gemeinschaft*, of communal solidarity, hatred of barriers and a sense of common life and action; but even that is to some degree a translation into concrete agrarian terms of German Romantic ideas which had already been in the air for a good half century before they were ever articulated by the Russians.

The second proposition is this: the important fact that conscious social and political thought came to its maturity at the same time as German Romanticism is a historical coincidence. I shall not call it an accident, because the roots of both these movements, if not identical, are perhaps to some extent intertwined. But at any rate this is a confluence which set the special tone and temper and content of specifically Russian thought about social, historical and political questions, and rendered it different from the discussion of such topics in other countries.

As to the lack of original thought in modern Russia, this is doubtless in part due to the fact that there was no solid, continuous intellectual tradition in Russia before Peter, no tradition either of scholarship or of logical argument or of rational metaphysics in the Russian Church, so far as I know: holy living, martyrdom, spiritual experience, a great hierarchical Church, battles between order and antinomian deviation, but nothing like the scholastic disciplines of the West, nor a secular Renaissance, nor a Reformation. I shall not enlarge on this, but it is a powerful factor in the situation which arose after Peter the Great sent his young men to Europe; when Western ideas did begin to enter en masse into the Russian Empire,

they were entering a virtual vacuum in which they encountered no counteracting ideas. In the West, one idea collides with another, like the atoms of Epicurus; there is constant interaction, and therefore no single idea or thesis or doctrine has a free run all to itself. Ideas run up against other ideas, destroy, modify, combine with one another, give birth to unintended and unpredicted consequences, and so constitute what is called a climate of opinion, and it is very difficult for any set of ideas to achieve monopoly. Whereas in Russia, simply because there were few counteracting ideas, seeds were wafted across from the Western world by all kinds of peculiar routes, fell on extremely fresh and receptive soil, and swiftly grew to enormous proportions. That is why, from early Romantic ideas to Marxism, Darwinism and beyond, Western ideas developed so powerfully in Russian conditions, and came to be so deeply and passionately believed, with a naivety and limitless dedication which transformed them. Nothing, perhaps, transforms ideas so much as being taken seriously. And Western ideas were accepted seriously in Russia with a strength just bordering on fanaticism, which even their authors in the West, or at any rate their later followers, seldom reached.

The most obvious case of this is Marxism. The development, for example, of the notion of the 'monolithic' party, or of the notion of class, is simply the literal and direct application, with no qualification, of certain Marxist theses – something which the founders and followers of 'scientific socialism' in the West did not think of doing. This tendency is strong throughout Russian nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectual history. Fourierism, Darwinism, populism, patriotic communism, love of the West, hatred of the West: where did such secular faith reach comparable peaks?

This liability to be overcome by ideas was noted quite early in Russian history. Joseph de Maistre, the Sardinian agent in Petersburg from the beginning of the century until 1817, comments in his interesting notes on Russia on the fact that nobody is so susceptible to ideas as the Russians. He, of course, is a passionate right-wing Catholic publicist, trying to warn people

about the effects of radicalism, liberalism, natural science, utilitarianism, scepticism and other diseases which have ravaged mankind since the eighteenth century. In the course of these notes, he says to one of his noble Russian friends that in the West there are two great anchors upon which society is founded. One is the Roman Church, the other is slavery. Only when the Church became so secure and respected and authoritative that it penetrated to every department of thought and action in Europe, and became the intellectual, moral, and spiritual centre of European life, was it able to abolish serfdom, which was a humane and Christian act which it had always sought to perform, but could not while society was in a state of insecurity and potential disintegration. In Russia the Church is not respected; the priests are ignorant and despised; the bishops and metropolitans are not held in sufficient public respect; hence it is impossible to let the Russian state rest on clerical foundations, because the Church lacks all traditional and all intellectual virtues, and indeed all social and public authority. Therefore, he says to Alexander and his other Russian correspondents, do not abolish serfdom. If you do, Russian society will disintegrate. It will disintegrate because Russians are oversusceptible to alien ideas, since they have very few of their own. He goes on to say that Russians, late arrivals in the Western world, overestimate the value of ideas from the West, so that a few revolutionary hotheads, aided by some university rebels ('quelque Pugatscheff d'une université'),<sup>3</sup> plus a few dissident leaders, are enough, if they are sufficiently fanatical and sufficiently steeped in subversive ideas from the West, to overturn the entire state. 'Soon you will find that your country will pass from barbarism to anarchy with no intermediate civilised interval.'<sup>4</sup> Therefore, he advises,

<sup>3</sup> 'Some university Pugachev'. Joseph de Maistre, *Quatre chapitres sur la Russie*, chapter 1: *Oeuvres complètes de J. de Maistre* (Lyon/Paris, 1884–7), viii 291. Emel'yan Ivanovich Pugachev (c.1742–1775) was the leader of a peasant and Cossack rebellion crushed in the reign of Catherine the Great.

<sup>4</sup> The transcript reads 'despotism', not 'anarchy', but this must be a mistake, whether by Berlin or the stenographer. Maistre writes (ibid.) about what will happen if the serfs are liberated: 'sans préparation, ils passeront infailliblement



retard science, retard knowledge, do not allow all these German scientists and literary men to come. These people come only because they are refugees. Refugees are people who have not made the grade in their own countries. That is why they wander. Decent people do not leave their families and their native soil. They work peacefully for their kings and governments. All the German Protestants and French Jacobins are essentially subversives, people who cannot but bore from within. If you allow too many into Russia, as you appear to be doing, and, moreover, if you start all these universities, encourage the sciences, encourage the arts, you will find that the Russians will take to all this much too eagerly. It will be like a heady wine to men not used to it, and will cause terrible inebriation, violence, chaos, and this will mean the end and ruin of your entire system.

Alexander I did not follow Maistre's advice; he made a few unconvincing efforts to check enlightenment. Nicholas I retarded education and tried to insulate Russia intellectually, both after the Decembrist revolt, and more particularly in the 1840s, and this policy was openly preached by really black reactionaries like Leont'ev and Pobedonostsev in the later nineteenth century. Yet these efforts to try to suffocate knowledge, prevent progress in the arts and sciences, to freeze (*podmorožit'*) Russia, which was the official formula of the obscurantists of the 1880s, was clearly a hopeless business. Ideas did enter; they were understood, they were acted upon, and all the revolutionary consequences which Maistre gloomily predicted did begin to occur. As Voltaire had

et brusquement de la superstition à l'athésisme, et d'une obéissance passive à une activité effrénée'. Berlin quotes this passage in 'Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism', translating it thus: 'without preparation, they will infallibly and suddenly pass from superstition to atheism, from passive obedience to unbridled activity' (CTH2 156). And in his lecture on Maistre in *Freedom and Its Betrayal* he paraphrases Maistre in these words: 'if you [...] liberate the serfs, why then your country will be plunged into the most vicious revolution. It will go from barbarism into anarchy.' There is no basis in Maistre for the reference to despotism in the transcript, where the 'quotation' is in any case a loose paraphrase of Maistre, who directly mentions neither barbarism nor the absence of a civilised interval.

remarked of the French Revolution, ‘It was books that did it all.’<sup>5</sup> This may be an exaggeration, but it contains far more truth than either Marxists or irrationalist historiographers will grant.

My second proposition is concerned with the Romantic movement. Why did the Russian intelligentsia become so interested in historical ideas? Largely because those were the ideas which were prevalent during the period during which Western ideas streamed into Russia, towards the end of the reign of Catherine the Great, who, despite repression, was not able to keep them out; even more so after the great promenade across Europe to Paris which occurred in 1814–15. This was an hour in which Russia suddenly found herself driving into Europe as a major power. I do not mean that Russian officers suddenly became infected by Western ideas, but they came into much closer contact with them than before. And this occurred together with the inevitable rise in the volume of Western education in Russia, a kind of progress inevitable in a country which was compelled to modernise itself, not especially out of national pride, but from the need, experienced by every powerful country, to develop a technological defence against technologically superior neighbours.

At any rate, Western ideas entered, and the Western ideas in question were to some degree Romantic ideas, stimulated largely by the German thinker Herder. Although the Russians did not read Herder more widely than they read other Germans, his ideas were very popular in Germany; they rapidly travelled to other countries, and in popularised and simplified forms affected a good many young Russian thinking men in the 1820s, 1830s and 1840s. The

<sup>5</sup> ‘Les livres ont tout fait’: ‘Epître au roi de Danemark, Christian VII, sur la liberté de la presse accordée dans tous ses états’ (1771): *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire* [ed. Louis Moland] (Paris, 1877–85), x 427. Maistre quotes this more than once: see, e.g., *ibid.*, chapter 4, 344. The transcript reads: ‘As Maistre had remarked after the French Revolution, “It was ideas that did it all.”’ But this seems to be another error. I have not (yet) found such a remark in Maistre’s works. See also A 541. ‘Les idées ont tout fait’ appears in [Dominique Georges Frédéric] de Pradt, *Congrès de Carlsbad*, part 1 (Paris/Brussels, 1819), 41, but this probably has no relevance to IB’s alleged quotation here.

central idea relevant to my thesis, for which Herder was responsible, is the notion of the individual *Volksgeist*; that is to say, the idea that it is not the case, as some French *philosophes* maintained, that men are similar everywhere, that the same laws produce similar results upon them, so that a general sociology can be formulated which will tell you, given knowledge of physical and other discoverable empirical circumstances, how the human beings placed in them are likely to develop. Herder taught that there existed certain specific differences, not so much of nations (in which he did not believe), but of cultural groups (largely determined by language) which exhibited unique public personalities of their own. Herder elucidated in a very compelling and imaginative fashion the notion of 'belonging' – of being a member of a whole – which previous philosophers had not explained to any important extent.

What does it mean to belong to a group? For Herder, to belong to a group was not simply to be born in the same soil as others, or to obey the same laws, or even to speak the same language as others. These were not sufficient conditions of being truly a member of a single unique group to which, willy-nilly and not by choice, you necessarily *belonged*. As a result, perhaps, of geographical and physical development, certain collections of human beings, according to Herder, developed a common language and common habits, and, as a result, a common culture. A culture to him meant at least something of this kind: If a man was rightly called a German, then the way in which he walked and ate and stood and sat, the way in which he created his legal system, the way in which he sang, the kind of books he wrote, the kind of dances he danced, the kind of songs he sang, the kind of political constitution which tended to develop amongst him and those like him, would have certain properties, family properties, in virtue of which all these dissimilar activities would be more akin, resemble each other more, in palpable ways than they resembled corresponding activities or ways of feeling and thought among, say, the Chinese or the Portuguese. A German could properly develop his nature and characteristics only among other Germans, because

he felt at home only among other Germans, and to feel at home meant that there were certain pattern properties, difficult to describe – gestalt properties – in virtue of which a certain way of arranging one's hair, a certain way of accenting one's voice, a certain attitude towards public life, a certain mode of musical composition, a certain sort of handwriting, a certain sort of legal system – all of these possessed certain qualities in common, in virtue of which you could say of a piece of handwriting or a vase, or a document or a mode of living, that it did or did not belong to a given human group or a given culture. The whole idea of the typical and the characteristic, in terms of which people began to attribute things – so that one could say that a painting or a sentiment or a gesture was typically Renaissance, or typically eighteenth-century, or typically radical, or typically Russian, or even typically Nizhny Novgorod – that kind of talk, which is part of the very texture of our thought and speech today, would not have been very intelligible before the middle, and indeed the second third, of the eighteenth century.

This was Herder's historic achievement. He went further than this, and said not only that there existed certain characteristics in terms of which certain kinds of common outlook and common behaviour could be defined, something in terms of which the people who shared them could be identified as a single group, and in terms of which the lives of these people were, in fact, determined. He said more: that members of a single culture moved towards a common goal, which entailed, and was entailed by, the culture in question and it alone. Human life was unintelligible unless you could understand that men were social in their very essence; and created things communally, in a semi-collective fashion. Ballads, forms of dancing, language – none of these things were individual creations. Language was not something which a given individual happened to invent. As Maistre, mocking the French Encyclopedists, said, it is not true to say that language, like everything else, was created by division of labour; language was not made like a machine, by the addition of mechanical components on the part of skilful technicians. Are we to believe that one

generation of men said BA, and the second generation said BE, that the Assyrians invented the nominative and the Medes invented the genitive?<sup>6</sup> This is not how language grows. There is such a process as impersonal growth, for which no particular person is responsible. Moreover cultures, like individuals, can be said to seek certain forms of satisfaction, even if no specific individual is aware of this, which could be called their goals. Happiness for the Germans is different from happiness for the French. The specific gravity – the central point – of one nation differs from that of another. Satisfaction for the Chinese is different from satisfaction for the Peruvians. This is because they grew up differently, and they seek after something different, and their works of art are differing forms of collective self-expression.

The notion of self-expression is something comparatively new, an invention of the Romantic movement. Until then, art was thought to be an activity governed by certain rules which had universal objective validity; and, by some, to be directed towards the reproduction of eternal Platonic originals, perfect patterns, impersonal, objective – identical for all rational men. Romanticism denied this. Art was now an attempt to say one's own word, to assert one's individuality, whether personal or collective. The value of my creation was that it was my own. Art was not an attempt to create objects, but to speak, express, communicate; what was communicated was a vision unique to the communicator, not a public entity which anyone with eyes might see.

This is the element of the Romantic movement which particularly struck the Russians. In the case of the Germans, you could say that it was historically a national response on the part of a humiliated people to the domination of the seventeenth-century French; that, if Richelieu and Louis XIII had not invaded and crushed and destroyed the Germans in the Thirty Years War, this agonised response to the French would not have occurred.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph de Maistre, *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, second conversation: *Oeuvres complètes de J. de Maistre* (Lyon/Paris, 1884–7), iv 88.

The psychological situation was that of a people who saw the French as the great, arrogant, impregnably dominant nation, masters of all the arts and the sciences, the central sun whose rays illuminate the world: so that the measure of a culture was the degree to which it reflected the unapproachable ideal standard in terms of which all things were judged. Sooner or later the Germans were bound to ask themselves whether it was indeed true that France was everything and Germany nothing: Have we Germans, then, nothing at all of our own, no claim, no achievement to put beside those of the conqueror? Wounded national feeling must take an aggressive form. The Germans put forward great claims: There is something which we have that they have not: they are superficial, formalistic, legalistic, a cold remnant of a once living Latin civilisation, now marching towards its doom. We have something they have not: an inner life, *Innigkeit*. We can look within and find spiritual treasures of which the French have no inkling. All their attainments are vain posing and show. Depth is a category unintelligible to these lovers of the external world. We and we alone have an understanding of what makes a human being. We have a capacity for music, which is inner art, as opposed to the glittering, external, superficial visual art of the French. Our mystics and poets have seen to the inner core of the spirit. Moreover we have the unspoiled simplicity of people who have not been corrupted by power and pleasure, by the hollow civilisation of the French.

The Russians caught at all this eagerly. In 1815 a large and powerful nation has just won a major war; it is headed by a small class of persons, educated in Western ideas, which have little – too little – application to Russian reality. Anybody who studies the works of Voltaire, or Montesquieu, or Rousseau (which are what the educated Russians, like all civilised Europeans, read), and then begins to think of how such ideas might be applied to Russian realities, is faced by the apparently insuperable obstacles of Russia's conditions, which I need not rehearse. If these ideas are too remote for Russian realities, then one is faced with the alternatives of trying to mould – or break – the reality in the name of the ideas; or else

of ignoring the reality, repressing its natural life, lest it break the minimum means required to keep it going at all.

The educated bureaucrats whom Peter the Great invented, and Catherine the Great perpetuated, did their best to invent ad hoc measures – short-term means of governing the great mass of the recalcitrant, ignorant, dark peasant population with its uneducated clergy. But ever since Western enlightenment penetrated the Empire there were always some men morally too sensitive, and intellectually too sympathetic, to Western progressive ideas, to be able to identify themselves with what was by and large a continuous repressive policy on the part of Catherine, Paul, and even Alexander. They cannot accept the repression, but neither have they the means of altering it. Hence the peculiar phenomenon of the typical eighteenth-century Russian nobleman, who reads Voltaire and Rousseau, with one hand half accepts their ideas, but with the other, since one must live as one can, quite contentedly whips his serfs, and half cynically, half resignedly accepts the life of an Oriental pasha. The two sides of the fathers' lives do not come together at all: and lead to the guilt complexes and neuroses of the sons.

This inner split is clearly observable even in the enlightened Alexander, and adds to the enigmatic quality of that ambivalent figure. Observe him, educated by his Swiss tutor, with his New Dealers around him, trying to reform the constitution, trying to reform Russian conditions; but the task is obviously far too great, and there is, moreover, a great war coming. Furthermore, it is quite obvious that any serious attempt at radical reform is likely to stir up all kinds of dormant forces, breed dangerous, uncontrolled movements which may shake the Church and the throne. Hence the de facto abandonment of the central reforms – for example, those of serfdom, civil liberties, obsolete feudal institutions, agrarian backwardness, obstacles to trade and industry, lack of education. They are abandoned not out of bad will, but because the would-be reformers feel that these kinds of concepts, these Western ideas, are too dangerous to apply, even by degrees, to too backward a people. And so you find what you always do in these

backward conditions: groups of intellectuals, bred on Western ideas, with no appropriate occupation in a medieval country, no jobs, no way of employing their unemployed energies, who either become depressed into a corrosive self-contempt and easy cynicism, or into acts of ineffectual revolt; or simply into quietism and passivity, a fate common enough among intellectuals in oppressed countries.

The first person to give vent to all this was Chaadaev. Chaadaev asked all the questions which came to preoccupy the Russian intelligentsia for ever afterwards. Chaadaev is the first person who says, in the spirit of the Herderian movement: What about us, our culture? Why do we exist? Is there some goal or purpose for which we were created? The French clearly fulfil their natural selves; so do the English; Western culture is a going concern; it produces magnificent works of art and great works of science. And we? Have we a history to which we can look back with any degree of pride, something which will inspire us with glory, inspire us with examples for the future? Karamzin has indeed written a magnificent history of the Russian Empire, but if you look at it more closely you will find that our history is empty. Our history contains nothing of the slightest interest to an educated man. Our history is the history of ignorance, brutality and failure. Our past is squalid: wandering tribes, feeble Byzantinism, Tatars, Poles, palace politics, the aping of foreign customs, poverty, stupidity, darkness. And our present? Our future? What is the cosmic mission of this great nation of many millions, living in sordid misery and ignorance? Is there some part for us to play in the drama of history? According to the Romantic movement, every human being, every human group, every association of human beings must have a goal, a purpose, the realising of which will give it satisfaction. What are our goals? Are we, perhaps, a slip, a mistake of the creator? Are we simply a hideous abortion of the creative process – a caution to other peoples, intended by God to warn them against following our own wretched path?

Chaadaev becomes intoxicated with self-hatred and mounts horror on horror. Then he wonders whether, on the contrary, there



is some special fate which Russia has been called upon to achieve which is as yet veiled from our sight. The famous first *Philosophical Letter*, as a result of which Chaadaev was officially pronounced mad, set the tone for the continuous self-denigration and breast-beating which later became the habitual mood of the Russian intelligentsia. Chaadaev struck the note – and struck it very loudly – of exultant self-depreciation which so deeply wounded the pride of patriots and nationalists, and not theirs alone. Sooner or later every Russian *intelligent* asked himself, in public as well as in private: What are we? In comparison with the French, with the Germans, with civilised Europeans, what are we? We scarcely exist. We have no native resources. We must learn, go to school in the West, make up for all those lost centuries, for Byzantium, the Tatars, Ivan the Terrible, the knout, pogroms, Siberia.

At the same time, in the *Apologie d'un fou*, which he was perhaps forced to write by the exigencies of the government, Chaadaev strikes the other note which is echoed equally in Russian writing and talk in the century that follows: Yes, we are young, we are barbarous, callow, ignorant, we are not in communion with European culture, but perhaps this is an advantage. Maybe because we are young and untried we are fresh; not exhausted by the great struggle for civilisation and domination which has so exhausted the now feeble and declining French, the commercial and narrow English, the neat, limited, pedantic, inhuman Germans. Perhaps we are being reserved for a marvellous fate. Perhaps we can pluck the fruits of the tree which others have grown. Perhaps there is some special virtue in backwardness.

This is a proposition which is afterwards repeated by Herzen and Chernyshevsky, then by a good many people in the 1870s, and triumphantly enunciated by no less an authority than Isaac Deutscher. Perhaps there is something peculiarly advantageous about joining the race so late, because this may free one from some painful stages passed by others – for example, the Industrial Revolution – whose fruits the latecomers may enjoy without having laboured to create them. They invent, we enjoy; they make the discoveries, they go through the terrible toil and tears and

blood that are the price of creating a civilisation, while we, being fresh, young, strong, numerous, powerful, may be able simply to pluck the fruits of the trees which they have grown with such care and suffering, and even use them against their creators, or if not against them, at any rate for our own advantage. This is, in effect, the second sermon of Chaadaev, and it too became a central topic in all subsequent social discussion in Russia.

This entire approach – the agonised self-questionings, the unending discussion of whither Russia is tending, the contrasts of ‘we’ and ‘they’ (the West), ‘their’ culture versus ‘our’ barbarism, ‘their’ worn out sophistication versus ‘our’ spiritual riches and unexhausted powers, ‘their’ dead reason versus ‘our’ heart and intuitive vision and life-giving spirit – all this is typical of a deep national sense of inferiority and inadequacy. The Germans were the first to set this fashion, but the Russians outdistanced their teachers: their preoccupation with themselves and their destinies became a national obsession. You do not in England, or in France or in Italy, at a comparable period find writers who ask: Why do we exist? Whither England? Whither France? Perhaps towards the end of the nineteenth century, when British power is beginning to wane, there does arise the question of justifying imperialism; such concepts as ‘the white man’s burden’ or France’s ‘civilising mission’ are born. But the writers who stood near the centre of their people’s consciousness – Dickens or Thackeray – do not ask: What is the next step to be? Where is England going? Why do we exist? Balzac and Stendhal do not say: Let us consider the phenomenon of France. Is there some goal which the French qua French must pursue, a specific element which they add to European culture, so that we must keep a sharp look-out – prepare ourselves most carefully not to miss our national or cultural cue – and play the historical role which providence has provided for us?

These writers are too confident for this; they simply try to create the best works of art that they can; or to make discoveries and inventions to the best of their ability. Whoever achieves these things is duly admired and confers glory upon his country. The Germans, who came rather later into the European picture, are

concerned by the problem of whether there exists a special German mission or message for the world; they discover it all too easily – not one mission, but many conflicting ones. But even they, by the 1830s and 1840s, are not wholly preoccupied with themselves. The Russians are far more narcissistic. All Russian literature after the 1830s is about Russia. There are certain exceptions, but broadly speaking the works of Gogol, of Tolstoy, of Dostoevsky, even of Turgenev, who is regarded as the purest artist of them all, are preoccupied with Russia, the Russian past, the Russian future, the varieties of Russian soul, what we are and what we should be, or should not be; the peculiar glories and miseries of being a Russian nobleman, a Russian peasant, a Russian writer, in the nineteenth century.

This springs largely from the peculiar coincidence of the emergence of Russia as a world power with the rise of the Romantic conception according to which every group has a goal, every human being has an end, a function or mission which can and must be discovered. This, together with the obvious fact that the Russian mission is far from self-evident – that, if it does exist, it seems heavily veiled from sight – causes an anxious and, at times, agonising desire to seek for an answer, for a pattern which will once and for all make clear what we are and where we should go. Religion is obviously unsatisfactory; at least, the Orthodox Church has obviously not got enough of a hold on the educated minority, brought up on the scepticism of the French and the metaphysics of the Germans, to provide a sufficient answer to their problems. Nor does politics provide it; nor do the facts of public life, which are extremely shaming, depressing, and such as no man of intelligence or good will would possibly contemplate without the acutest feelings of horror and humiliation.

There is something very remarkable about a country in which a large section of the educated public feel it to be their duty to remain in permanent opposition; where Herzen says that Russian literature

is nothing but one vast indictment against the Russian state,<sup>7</sup> or where Korolenko, writing in the twentieth century, declared, ‘Russian literature became my homeland.’<sup>8</sup> When he said this, nobody was in any doubt about what he meant. It would be odd if a writer in England, let us say Somerset Maugham, were to say, ‘English literature became my homeland.’ What would this mean to the average reader of a newspaper? It would not mean very much if a French writer suddenly said, ‘French literature became my homeland.’ If Malraux said that, it would be far from clear what he meant. When Korolenko said what he did, his meaning was all too clear. This could have been said equally well by Belinsky or Chernyshevsky or even Turgenev. His audience would understand him to mean that although he loved his country and his people, yet Russian history was a history of crimes, vices, follies, disasters, weakness; heroism and martyrdom on one side, repression and brutality on the other; whereas Russian literature was a great moral instrument, and a great political instrument too, a mirror in which you could see the genuine ideals of humanity in general, and of Russian society in particular.

Literature is criticism of life, said Matthew Arnold.<sup>9</sup> But in Russia it was a very concrete and specific criticism of the historical evolution of Russian society. Hence History with a capital H, the patterns and purposes of history, and the theories of history, might

<sup>7</sup> **‘Le grand acte d’accusation que la littérature russe dresse contre la vie russe’/‘Великий обвинительный акт, составляемый русской литературой против русской жизни’:** ‘Du développement des idées révolutionnaires en Russie’, chapter 6; A. I. Gertsen [Herzen], *Sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* (Moscow, 1954–66) vii 211/247.

<sup>8</sup> **‘Я нашел тогда свою родину, и этой родиной стала прежде всего русская литература.’** Literally: ‘I discovered my own homeland, and that homeland became, above all, Russian literature.’ *Istoriya moego sovremennika*, chapter 27; V. G. Korolenko, *Sobranie sochinenii v pyati tomakh* (Leningrad, 1989–91), iv 270.

<sup>9</sup> ‘The work of the two orders of men [those famous ‘for ever’ and those famous ‘in their own generation’] is at bottom the same, – a criticism of life. The end and aim of all literature, if one considers it attentively, is, in truth, nothing but that.’ Joubert’ [sc. Matthew Arnold], *Essays in Criticism* (London, 1865), 249.

have been created for the imaginations of Russian intellectuals. The early history of the Russian intelligentsia – the 1830s and 1840s – is full of talk about the philosophy of history. Is history determined or is there freedom of the will? Is Hegel right or wrong? Is the truth in Saint-Simon or in Fourier or in some other teacher – Feuerbach, Comte, Schelling, Count August Cieszkowski? These discussions went on everywhere. They occur in the native countries of Hegel and Saint-Simon to some degree also, on a more theoretical level. Professors discussed these questions, young poets discussed them, other young intellectuals talked about them, but in the comparatively calm spirit in which people can now talk about Spengler or Beard or Toynbee. There are those who think that Toynbee's schemata of world history are correct: and those who deride him. Nothing follows in practice. It is very difficult to find someone whose life is so Toynbee-ridden that his whole moral, intellectual, political and social mode of existence is literally transformed by the thought that since he is living in such and such an age, X must be the challenge, Y is the proper response, and therefore one must dedicate one's life to A rather than B. But this was literally true about the Russians.

It was Herzen again who said that Russians did not lack logic, what they lacked was good judgement. He was attracted and repelled by the spectacle of men who accepted certain intellectual premisses because they were guaranteed by Western authorities and argued from these premisses in a perfectly rigorous fashion. They were not at all lacking in logic, not mystical or preoccupied or vague, not muddled; on the contrary, all too rigid, all too lucid. They argued from these premisses to certain conclusions; and if the conclusions were eccentric, or appallingly difficult, to translate into practice, wished to implement them all the more passionately: bent their will desperately to achieve them. The attitude was that the more unpalatable the conclusions, the more categorical the obligation to implement them in practice, since if one retreats before difficulties this merely indicates moral weakness. The attitude is one of total commitment: if the premisses are true, the argument correct, and the conclusions valid, then by God one must

try to implement them, because not to do that is to betray the truth, not to do or say what you know to be correct; and what is this but moral betrayal, something that no honest man can permit himself? The more agonising the choice, the holier: the less realisable the plan, the greater must be the enthusiasm, the dedication, the martyrdom. That is the mood of some of the young, left-wing intellectuals grouped around Herzen, Belinsky and their successors in the 1860s and 1870s and after.

Belinsky was correctly described as the protomartyr of this movement.<sup>10</sup> The search for an altar on which to immolate himself is very patent. First the unworldly, elitist, aestheticising, pre-Hegelian phase. Then Hegel and the belief that everything is rationally determined, part of a rational world plan; hence the disasters of history are necessary discords which contribute to a vast harmony which will be visible only from a higher, historically later standpoint; that, at least, is his interpretation of Hegel, and it is not nearly as incorrect as some later interpreters have tried to make out. When Belinsky argues, it is not just theoretical conclusions to which he comes, as a literary critic, or as a man who talks in a salon, discussing these things with his friends; he tries to shape his life accordingly, and preaches his doctrine, say ‘reconciliation to reality’<sup>11</sup> – rationalist quietism – or rebellion, or materialism. The young men read his articles avidly, and having read are moved to dedicate themselves to all the various, often dangerous activities the need for which seems to follow from the truth of his propositions, and from the necessity of realising them in practice.

No doubt this occurred in France and Germany too. But the intensity seems greater in Russia, and the simplicity and naivety too. Unless we can tell the shape of history, how can we know what to do? Herzen asks whether history has a libretto. This is no idle theoretical speculation. It is urgently necessary to know whether Hegel and the determinists are right, whether there are certain

<sup>10</sup> Cf. SR2 343 and note 3.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. SR2 361 and note 2.

objective laws that govern mankind, so that to oppose these laws is folly and madness; for if this is so, one must discover what these laws are, and then adapt oneself to them; whereas if, on the contrary, it is the case that all such schemes and laws are simply human inventions of a rather bogus kind, life acquires a different colour. Perhaps Granovsky is right after all – perhaps it is only small intellects that settle comfortably into one dominant idea and go to sleep in it like a bed. Perhaps, after all, nature is much more various, much richer, much less capable of being squeezed into narrow man-made patterns than the Russian Hegelians, at any rate, suppose. If so, there is far greater room for human freedom, far greater room for human invention, spontaneity, imagination, for altering the lives both of individuals and of nations, in accordance with ideals which are not necessarily deduced from a rigid historical pattern. When Herzen argues about this, this is not simply the casual meditation *in vacuo* of a *déclassé* and uprooted Russian intellectual, as some people have tried to represent it. He is trying to work out a programme for practical action. He wants to know whether the West is, as some Westerners say, rotting, in decline, finished – so that one adopts its values to one's own destruction – or whether, on the contrary, it is the source of the arts and sciences, the home of all truth and progress, which we backward, barbarous, latter-day Russian Anacharses should humbly imitate.

Herzen concludes that history has no libretto,<sup>12</sup> and draws semi-existentialist conclusions in his early essays. Belinsky says there *is* a libretto, and then decides this cannot be true, for if the libretto is what it is represented as being by Hegel and his disciples, it is too horrible: and incompatible with any degree of moral consciousness on the part of men. It involves so much condonation of so much brutality, idiocy and cruelty that no human being with a normal degree of moral sensibility could bring himself to accept it; and therefore he rejects the entire conception as doing too much violence to men's ethical sense. This entails a new vision of history: there is always some historical framework, never a timeless ethical

<sup>12</sup> Cf. RT2 105 and note 1.

or scientific schema of the kind dear to the eighteenth century, or its belated disciple, Tolstoy.

Consider the case of Chernyshevsky: he is much impressed by Hegel's triads (except that Hegel seldom – unlike Fichte – used the triadic schema, for all that Chernyshevsky thought that he did), and then proceeds to found his whole philosophy on the fact that there are certain laws of history; that they are more economic than was hitherto thought; that one society can profit by the fruits of trees that other societies have grown, so that there is no need for Russia to go through all the horrors of the Industrial Revolution of the West; indeed that it is possible for Russia to pursue a path of her own, provided that she makes appropriate use of the industrial, scientific and technological discoveries of the West; and that the efficacy of such measures can, in turn, be demonstrated by what learned authorities – that is, specialists in historical movement – have said. If Chernyshevsky were not so clear that somebody or other got this right, that Hegel told the truth, or that Buckle was telling the truth, or that there was truth even in things that John Stuart Mill had said – if he were not sure of this, quite sure, half his unshakeable conviction would have gone.

This is not, in Chernyshevsky's mind, or Dobrolyubov's or Pisarev's, simply the product of empirical observation, or a moral system, as it often is in the contemporary West. When John Stuart Mill discusses what ought to be done, the questions for him are largely moral, that is: What would make society happier? This policy rather than that. Which acts of Parliament should be passed? These rather than those. The problems are not posed in historico-evolutionary terms, as part either of a blind material, or of a purposive, system. When Bismarck clashes with liberals in Germany, there is not a very great deal of talk, at least conscious talk, about the fact that, history being as it is, it is prescribed that we must follow it along a certain path, since if we do not, we shall betray the whole pattern of our development, commit the crime and error of fighting the cosmos. There is no conscious talk by the political ideologues of the 1870s of patterns built into our German organism which are such that, if we proceed to deviate from them,



we shall destroy ourselves, betray our pre-established destiny – the goals which history has specially set up for and in us. You do not get this kind of patter among serious men. But in Russia this is done solemnly and by men of the highest gifts.

Take, for example, the disputes of the mid-century between the Slavophiles and the Westerners. Surely this is a truism: when Khomyakov writes a world history, he carefully distinguishes great spiritual types, and principles – *nachala* – which then function as levers and agents of History with a capital H. The two leading genera of men are Iranians and Kushites. The Iranians are spontaneous, imaginative, creative: in them there is a principle of free and embracing concert with others, and they create a free society which is able to live in accordance with a freely and generously accepted self-discipline, akin to the affection and respect that unite a family or a Church, and so have no need of the straitjackets which the degenerate Roman Catholicism of the West has pressed upon the backs of the unfortunate Europeans in a desperate struggle for survival. The Kushites, on the other hand, are the wrecks of decayed humanity, unhappy men who have fallen under one of two yokes. The first yoke is that of the rigid, dead hierarchy of the Latins, where everything is bureaucratized, where the human spirit has been driven out, where all is but dry bones, a lifeless graveyard – inasmuch as the secular, bourgeois outlook together with the ossified hierarchy of Rome has totally destroyed the spontaneous humanity to which human beings ought to aspire.

The alternative hell is the Protestant pulverisation of society into atomic individuals, unable to co-operate except on the basis of cold contractual laws, rules and regulations written down by officials, leading to, and symptomatic of, the kind of relations between human beings that are remote from affection or solidarity or sense of community – the entire system of claims and rights, rights which are always walls that divide people from each other, as opposed to the communal structure in which the Russians still live, in which men are bound by the kind of love that members of a family bear one another, at the opposite pole to those who are constantly jealously watching others lest they be robbed of some

portion of their own coveted rights, lest they be deceived or done down by some rapacious usurper, some vulture ready to pounce on them from some outside vantage point. When a Khomyakov talks like that, and elaborates his historical tapestry, he is not merely describing the past: he has in mind something immediate, concrete and political. He wants the Russian state to pursue certain policies, internal and external – and he speaks for the other Slavophiles. And there were enough young men to listen to him who, if only they could get into power, if only they could get into responsible positions, would try to alter public policies in the light of these ideas.

The opposite, of course, is equally true: the Westerners, who maintain that such talk is nothing but belated chauvinism – the relics of German Romanticism crudely transplanted on to Russian soil, a form of narcissism or preoccupation with oneself, narrow Russian nationalism garnished with mystical nonsense, obscurantism, irrationalism – are advocating a political programme too. The West has succeeded; we have failed, thus far, to achieve a tolerable public life. Hence our advocacy of imitation of, at least, political institutions: parliaments, suffrage, the judiciary, economic rationalisation, civil liberties, sciences and arts. The West is far in advance of us, in the van of progressive humanity: we too must create the possibility for this. The argument is by historical analogies, not in timeless moral or political or sociological terms. The great disputes inside the revolutionary party itself – between, say, the Jacobins and the gradualists in the populist movement – take place in a historical framework. Tkachev, Lavrov, Debogory-Mokrievich, the young Mikhailovsky are always invoking a historical image, a historical pattern, in contrast to similar arguments in Europe.

In the disputes between the German conservatives and the German liberals this is far less frequent. There we find plenty of general reference to national tradition, historicist theories of law, what we Germans (or Western Slavs or Italians) stand for, and so forth, but we do not, for the most part, find specific interpretation of the past, designed to demonstrate a precise objective pattern as

dominant in history, a pattern which must be understood in detail if one is to be effective at all. Thus Tkachev says that we must rapidly create an elite of trained revolutionaries (not that Tkachev is particularly historicist; but still, the fact that even he is drawn into this maelstrom is symptomatic enough), because we must have a revolution quickly. If we do not, the enemy will get us, and there may be no revolution at all. It is clear that we cannot have a revolution if the peasants have to be educated first, because they are a vast inert mass, ignorant, stupid and reactionary; nor do they want a revolution; and it will take years before they can be awoken to a proper revolutionary consciousness. Hence, if the right kind of society is to emerge, the only thing is to do things for people – make a revolution for them, not with them: for they will only ruin us. We, the dedicated revolutionary elite, having studied the ways in which culture has to be brought to people, and who wish liberty to be attained, must do this, because if we do not, and very soon too, the moment will be past – the historic moment. What is this historic moment? One can work it out from observation of the historic pattern. When the moment – the *kairos* – occurs, you must strike. It may never recur. Unless you train a ruthless elite, this cannot be done.

To which the populists reply: If you make a revolution by means of your small elite, then observe what happened in the past, what happened with the Jacobins – see what happened in France. If you want a small elite which makes a revolution against the wishes of the people (because they do not understand the need for it and do not desire it), then this elite has to act dictatorially, and protect itself against counter-revolution. In the course of this it must accumulate a good deal of power: there are always counter-revolutionaries everywhere; the people go on being stupid and perverse; they may not like being hectored and bullied, even for their own good; therefore you – the revolutionary elite – will have to repress them, squash them; in the course of this you will create a self-perpetuating elite, and goodbye to the liberties of the people.

Moreover, in the very course of regimenting people into making a revolution, you alter them: you militarise them; you give them

psychological attributes which make them no longer fit for liberty. The very army which you create in order to destroy the oppressor is, as a result of the rigid training which you have given it, no longer capable of those moral ideals, that taste for liberty, that possibility of a civilised life for the sake of which, ostensibly, you have created this same army; therefore the creation of the revolutionary dictatorship is a self-defeating move. Observe what happened in the case of the French Revolution, and other revolutions of a similar type.

To which Tkachev answers in his turn: But if we wait, the Russian state – if it is less stupid than it is at the moment, and we cannot guarantee that the Tsarist state will go on being stupid for ever – will take certain counter-measures. It will become more flexible, more rational. In its own interest it will create jobs for would-be revolutionaries. Who, after all, are these people, our revolutionary army? Doctors, lawyers, agricultural experts, scientists of various sorts, educated people of one kind or another. If they are given opportunities of having laboratories, factories, good professional practices – legal, medical, literary – these people will become quite contented, they will lose their elan, and our revolutionary forces will evaporate. This is surely what has happened in the past. You will observe that it has occurred in the case of previous revolutions, where the state, by making concessions to the discontented, has always satisfied a large number of them, with the result that they become *embourgeoisé*, fit into the system, quieten down, become pillars of society, harmless liberals. This kind of historical sociology – Franco Venturi gives an excellent account of the debates in his book *Roots of Revolution* – is batted forwards and backwards, always in terms of historical examples, always in terms of the notion that there is light to be obtained from the actual laws of history.

So, too, Mikhailovsky, when he moves into the centre of the stage – somewhere in the late 1870s and the 1880s – is concerned to demonstrate that, for example, determinism is not true. The old human problem of free will and determinism – not, so far as I can see, yet solved – has been discussed for more than two millennia,

never more intensively than in our own time. The people who discuss it are usually either philosophers talking about it professionally, or ordinary persons who occasionally give the matter a thought, occasionally feel worried about it – it seldom fills their lives. But the case of the Russians is different. It was crucially important for Mikhailovsky to prove that what Darwin, or at least his sociological adapters, maintained was not true; or that Marx was mistaken, since it is not the case that human beings are slaves of inexorable historical laws, ‘little toes’,<sup>13</sup> as he put it, upon the foot of some vast impersonal organism which cannot determine itself but is determined by something over which they have no control. For in that case freedom is an illusion, the agony of moral choice is a delusion, we are ciphers, we are cogs in an enormous historical machine; and to think this is to let revolutionary zeal drain away, to let the struggles of human beings to create better moral and intellectual conditions for and by themselves come to an end, to believe that this will have to be left to the historical forces, which operate at their own pace, in their own way.

For Mikhailovsky it is very important that this, and still more its terrible implications, should be shown to be false, since, in fact, he did believe it to be false; and so he spent pages and pages of argument on this. This was not, for him or his readers, a theoretical issue: upon the solution you arrive at will depend what form the conspiracy should take; whether, for example, you should join *Narodnaya volya*, and proceed to enter a Jacobin conspiracy, concentrate all your meagre reserves on assassinating the tsar, upheaving the country and creating chaos, because from this – given free will and the desire for and knowledge of the good life – a better form of society will necessarily arise; whereas, on the

<sup>13</sup> Probably a reference to N. K. Mikhailovsky’s ‘**O Vsevolode Garshine**’, *Severnyi vestnik* 1885 no. 12 – repr. in, e.g., his *Literaturno-kriticheskie stat'i* (Moscow, 1957), 312–17 – where much is made of Garshin’s metaphor, in his story ‘Trus’ (‘The Coward’), of a soldier as a ‘toe’ (‘palets ot nogi’), an ‘insignificant part’ of a ‘huge organism’. But Mikhailovsky does not here use IB’s formulation, which may well be a characteristically Berlinian streamlined recasting of what was actually said.

contrary, if you say that this is impossible because the laws of history are such that no putsch, no violence will produce this desirable result unless this or that stage is reached – because history works in an unalterable way – then you must plan things very differently.

The outcome of this argument will affect actual tactics; it did so affect the tactics of the very people whose intellectual and political work created the atmosphere and the soil for the Russian Revolution. Again, Herzen wrote to Bakunin in 1869 (in the *Letters to an Old Comrade*) and told him he was mistaken; that one could not make revolutions without regard to the historical stage reached by a given society, because if one made revolutions while people were still bourgeois and pursued bourgeois ideals, the revolution would not produce a socialist result. ‘Out of the stones of a prison-house one cannot build a dwelling for the free.’<sup>14</sup> Therefore you must wait; therefore gradualism; one must realise that history has its own pace which cannot be forced; we cannot always indulge in what Herzen calls Petrogradism – that is, the sudden breaking of the traditional in some violent and catastrophic fashion. Peter the Great could, Attila could, we cannot: the laws of history – or sociology, as some prefer – tell us why. The appeal, even by Herzen – not an obsessed historicist – is still to the possibility of discovering the pattern of history, such that if you can satisfy yourself that it is the true pattern, you will know what to do; above all, what is utopia, what cannot be done, at any rate in the way that the unhistorical Bakunin wants it done.

<sup>14</sup> In *From the Other Shore* Herzen wrote that the French radicals of 1848 ‘want, without altering the walls [of the prison], to give them a new function, as if a plan for a jail could be used for a free existence’ (‘хотят, не меняя стен, дать им иное назначение, как будто план острога может годиться для свободной жизни’), ‘**S togo berega**’ [‘From the Other Shore’], chapter 3, A. I. Gertsen [Herzen], *Sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* (Moscow, 1954–66) vi 51; Alexander Herzen, *From the Other Shore*, trans. Moura Budberg, and *The Russian People and Socialism*, trans. Richard Wollheim, with an introduction by Isaiah Berlin (London, 1956) 57.

Given all this, there was no riper soil in the whole world on which Marxist seeds could fall. If ever there was a historicist theory, it was Marxism; and when it came to Russia, a very great many Russian radicals felt that the key had at least been found. Marxism – a variant of historicism – was a confirmation of their general approach. No other group of dominant intellectuals – certainly none in Europe – was quite so deeply dedicated to faith in historical laws; laws discovered by Hegel, or by Buckle, or by somebody else – by Comte, by Spencer, by the Saint-Simonians, the Fourierists, the idealists, the materialists. These teachers were taken quite seriously in Europe too, but not quite so seriously. Where people were dominated by these ideas Marxism was simply the latest, the strongest, the most coherent, the most imaginative and obviously the most plausible among them.

Later on, various brands of Russian socialists (social democrats and Bolsheviks, for instance) argued on those kinds of lines. Struve, for example, in the 1890s worries about determinism. He is worried about what to say to the nascent Russian social democracy. If the laws of history are as Marxists declare them to be, how can one expect people to take enormous risks in the effort to mould their own lives, when it looks as if their lives were going to be moulded for them by the inevitable working out of inexorable historical laws? He replies that Marxism gets this right: ninety per cent of our existence is indeed determined, but there is still ten per cent left, in which men can do something on their own; but if this ten per cent were removed, then, he conceded, there would be no incentive for action. His opponents, on the other hand, are furious with him even about the ninety per cent – for saying Russia must go through a capitalist phase because it is unavoidable. It is only in Russia that we find disciples writing touchingly to Karl Marx and saying: Master, you say there are these inexorable historical stages. Cannot we in Russia somehow manage to circumvent them? Is not there some way of circumnavigating the stage of painful industrialisation, which, according to you, all

societies must go through before they reach the point at which the proletariat overthrows the bourgeoisie?<sup>15</sup>

At first Marx was very impatient about this, and in effect took the line that it was absurd to be asked to exempt people from the inevitable stages of history. And yet, because the Russians insisted and implored, he finally produced a draft of a document which said that he was, after all, writing with the West in mind. In Russia maybe it is possible to proceed overnight. Perhaps in Russia one might move from primitive socialism straight into advanced socialism by profiting from the gains of the industrialised West; provided, of course, that there is a revolution in the West – a world revolution, in effect, which would carry Russia on the crest of its wave.

So terrified was Plekhanov of the effects of this concession upon the Russian social democracy, upon the whole revolutionary movement, upon the whole notion of what the party should be, how to organise it and what they were to do, that he literally concealed this, to him, devastating letter, to the great indignation of other Russian socialists of all kinds. The letter was published only in 1924, by Ryazanov, after Plekhanov's death. No publication of any letter would have been feared to such a degree by German social democrats or French social democrats, not to speak of others. Bernstein and Kautsky had their disagreements. Jules Guesde and Jaurès' possibilists quarrelled bitterly enough. But there did not exist this absolute and mystical dedication to a metaphysical schema guaranteed by the written word: the knowledge that history obeys laws which only needed to be discovered by the experts; with the corollary that in the absence of such knowledge it would be impossible – and therefore quite

<sup>15</sup> This is a reference to an exchange between Vera Zasulich and Marx. **Zasulich's letter** was written on 16 February 1881, and **Marx replied** on 8 March. See Teodor Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the Peripheries of Capitalism* (New York, 1983), 98–9, and Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (London, New York and Moscow, 1975–2004), xlvii 71–2.



irrational – to try to undertake any form of decent or effective practical action at all.

This is the creed of the first Russian Marxists. In 1905 disputes occur about whether this is or is not the moment, the historic occasion. These always take historical forms. The questions are: Are we ripe? Is the proletariat ripe? Does a majority of workers exist? Where do we stand, in the Marxist calendar, and what is the proper step for rational men on this or that unavoidable rung in the ladder? The same issues repeat themselves until 1917, and in 1917. Even the row about *Dr Zhivago* is conducted in a historical form. Pasternak is absolutely steeped in historicism; he believes in human freedom, but within a sublime historical teleology. He went to Hermann Cohen's lectures in Marburg, and Hermann Cohen was interested in the philosophy of history, and preached Kantian doctrine, which is rather more like a modified Hegelianism. Pasternak tells you, for example, that Christianity was the first movement which gave the individual a consciousness of himself as other than a part of an impersonal mass, as a free entity seeking to lay his life on the altar of his own individual ideals; and that the attempt to crush people in the name of some impersonal ideal denies the course of history, the growth of man's historic consciousness, which has transformed human beings so that they understand their own essence and condition, their relationship to each other, to life, to death, and without which this particular historical process could not have occurred as it did.

To this the critics of the journal *Novy mir*, who wrote to him, rejoin by taking up his premisses. They declare: You are obsolete, you are out of date, you do not understand the Revolution; you do not understand what has happened, you are living outside history; this is a subjective aberration; this is self-insulation from the currents of history; you do not understand for whom you are writing, what you are writing, where and when you are living.

The tone of both sides – both of Pasternak's own sermon and of the attack upon it – takes a historical form quite naturally, a form which it would not take in any other country. I cannot imagine that a critic in the United States, even, or in Europe, who was attacking

a book would denounce it mainly in the name of its anachronistic quality and the danger of anachronism as such; would say to the writer: You say to these people something which will mislead them, mislead them by misrepresenting the pace, the shape and the pattern of the historical process, in terms of which alone life, the individual, truth, justice, values can be understood.

The whole of the great dispute about whether values are objective or subjective, whether they are historically produced, or produced by the rise of one class or another, or on the contrary whether there are such things as values beyond classes, which apply to all human beings, which are transcendental, is a dispute about historicism. The heresies which it was held, at the beginning of this century, had been fallen into by people like Lunacharsky or Bogdanov or Bazarov – that is, ‘god-builders’ and ‘god-seekers’<sup>16</sup> and so on – were denounced in the first place for their alleged misunderstanding of the historic process – always by Plekhanov, to some degree also by Lenin.

Finally, I turn to those people in Russian intellectual history who are not historicists. To begin with, the anarchists are not. Bakunin is not. One of the interesting things about Bakunin is that in spite of his excellent Hegelian training, and in spite of the fact that he was a Slavophil for a time, and therefore to that extent historicist, when he emerged from prison and settled himself in London he preached the doctrine that a revolution could in principle occur anywhere at any time. All that was necessary was to collect a sufficient number of dedicated men – revolutionaries, if need be desperadoes – who could then set any part of the world on fire. He thought that Russia, and Slav lands in general, were ripest, because there the peasants had less to lose than anywhere else: conditions were far more desperate than they were elsewhere; there was less traditional culture, less historic weight upon these men’s shoulders, and therefore they would rise and overthrow things more easily. The idea of waiting for the moment, or tracing the moment in history at which alone a revolution must succeed,

<sup>16</sup> ‘Bogostroitelei’ and ‘bogoiskateli’.

was comparatively distant from his thoughts. I do not deny that this is partly due to the fact that Bakunin was at once an extremely dynamic and very frivolous man; and therefore did not want to concern himself too much with intellectual problems at all. He used metaphysics for his own ends: it fed his imagination and temperament, as myths do those of a poet. What he wanted was action, to set things on fire wherever and whenever possible: *on s'engage et puis on verra*.<sup>17</sup> The first thing to do is break, blow up, set things on fire, and then we shall do what we can. He was not going to be deterred from the resolve to do something very violent, very explosive by a few logical arguments or historical analogies – or by scientific induction, in spite of his respect, or ostensible respect, for Marx and the achievements of ‘science’.

The same is true, though in a much milder degree, about Kropotkin. Perhaps it is the result of this that anarchism in Russia was so negligible a movement. Apart from the rather bogus anarchism of the Green International in 1917–19, the only anarchists I know about are a body of men with black flags who occupied several buildings in Moscow, and were in the end easily and ruthlessly liquidated by Trotsky. Trotsky himself, indeed, offers a good example of the kind of historicism I mean. Anybody who constantly uses the category ‘the waste-paper basket of history’,<sup>18</sup> as Trotsky does, into which those who are not

<sup>17</sup> Various versions of this principle are attributed to Napoleon as his military motto. The earliest such attribution I have seen is of ‘On s’engage partout, et puis Pon voit’: (Lieutenant) Evelyn Baring, *Staff College Essays* (London, 1870), 47. The same version was used when Napoleon was still alive by August von Kotzebue in a note on military tactics that mentions Napoleon but does not attribute the remark to him (or indeed to anyone): *Literarisches Wochenblatt* (Weimar, 1818–19) iii 16. It seems best to regard it as a proverb that Bonaparte adopted.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. AC2 287/2. The original (variously translated) phrase, ‘pomoinaya yama istorii’, first occurs in the first paragraph of ‘The Collapse of Terror and Its Party (On the Azef Case)’, in L. Trotsky, *Sochineniya* (Leningrad, 1926), iv 345; this article was first published in Polish in 1909, but without this paragraph (because it was less relevant to a Polish readership?). In 1917, according to Nikolay Sukhanov (who was there), Trotsky used the phrase ‘sornaya korzina

historically adapted to their environment are automatically thrust, is deeply historicist in his outlook. Martov was hurled by Trotsky, acting on behalf of history, on to this rubbish-heap – as were all the Kadets and Socialist-Revolutionaries, most Mensheviks and others. This is pure historicism: there is a direction of history, and you have to click into place; if you take a wrong turn, or if you do not understand exactly where you are at a particular historical moment, out you go into eternal oblivion.

Tolstoy, of course, is a famous case of anti-historicism, but he was conscious of uttering paradoxes. When Tolstoy says that history does not answer the questions we want answered, that history ‘is like a deaf man who answers questions nobody has asked him’,<sup>19</sup> his point is that there are certain important questions which trouble us – about moral standards, the ends of life, the nature of power, what makes some human beings able to command other people, what dominates human lives, why enormous numbers of men suddenly move from East to West and then from West to East, as in the Napoleonic Wars or the great migrations – and that history is incapable of answering these; historians deal with a lot of boring trivialities. In saying this, Tolstoy is well aware that he stands against the general current of his day. He is delighted to do this because he is a somewhat perverse thinker and wishes to discomfit the smug progressive intelligentsia. My point is that everyone writing in Russia had to come to terms with history somewhere, even if only to defy it. Few were content just to ignore the philosophy of history or to be uninterested in it, as might be the case in the West. Tolstoy swam against the intellectual current of his time quite consciously and opposed to the historicism of his

istorii’, ‘the dustbin of history’, in an anathema on the Mensheviks when they walked out of the Second Congress of Soviets in Petrograd: N. N. Sukhanov, *Zapiski o revolyutsii* (Berlin, 1922–3), vii 203. Trotsky uses the same phrase in his own account of the episode in ‘The Congress of the Soviet Dictatorship’, the last chapter of his *The History of the Russian Revolution*: L. Trotsky, *Istoriya russkoi revolyutsii* (Berlin, 1931–3) ii/2 337.

<sup>19</sup> *War and Peace*, epilogue, part 2, chapter 1: L. N. Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow/Leningrad, 1928–64) xii 300.

time his own older, eighteenth-century rationalist views. He claimed to have seen through the nonsense of Hegel, Marx, Burke, the fashionable theorists of his day. He accuses them of being deceivers. Instead of answering the great questions, they put up a lot of artificial constructions, a lot of spillikins, houses of cards, which a strong wind – Tolstoy's intellect – will blow away. He declared that man is the same everywhere, that historical evolution does not alter essentials, that if only men saw the simple truth, and followed it, all problems could be solved. This is a very conscious anti-historicism, not non-historicism or lack of preoccupation with history.

The only other class of persons in Russia who are not obsessed by historicism – and this is a significant fact – are the professional historians. They are the only Russian writers who are not obsessed by historiography – even the older historians, even Granovsky, who was supposed to be Hegelian. Granovsky's writings show that he is mildly affected by Hegel to the extent of supposing that humanity has certain general ends, which nobody would deny, that people on the whole seek shelter, food, security, a minimum of moral and intellectual expression. There is some direction in which they are moving; history is subject to human progress and not to mere accident and chance. But he is very fierce against the notion that there are certain inexorable laws in terms of which history can be written, or that free will is an illusion, or that men are unwise to seek to alter their lives in the face of vast inevitable forces. In Solov'ev, who, I suppose, is the leading historian of the 1850s and '60s and '70s, there is no trace of obsessive historicism; nor in Klyuchevsky, nor in Kareev, Platonov, Milyukov; there is no obsessive historicism in any of the major Russian historians.

From this, it seems to me, a certain moral may perhaps follow, which is that if one actually writes history, the tendency to squeeze things into patterns become somewhat diminished. Who were the great pattern-makers? Saint-Simon, Hegel, Marx, Spengler, Danilevsky, Toynbee. None of these persons, to my knowledge, ever actually sat down to write a piece of connected narrative history, or engaged in historical research over a limited range,

engaged in scrupulous detailed scholarship. I am no historian; but I suspect that those who try to write the history of twenty or thirty years, not as a grand synthesis, or in terms of one side or the other in a historical conflict, but as a piece of connected historical tissue, are probably less tempted to try to squeeze the facts into a preconceived pattern. This generalisation may well have exceptions. But it seems to me, on the whole, that anyone who has to go through the painful business of empirical research into specific facts of history tends to be so struck, consciously or unconsciously, by the irregularity of human formations, by the fact that while there are, of course, causal laws operating in history, yet at the same time there is no overall pattern in terms of which facts can be arranged in neat categories, that such people are the least liable to be run away with by some huge historico-philosophical notion. The vast metaphysical constructions in which these Russians believed were objects of faith and devotion to those who needed a guarantee, a comforting assurance of the intelligibility of the universe, from an outside agency. Faith in historical laws propped up what is ultimately a faith in the future of a backward, confused and ignorant society, without adequate moral and intellectual self-confidence. That is ultimately the psychological root of the yearning to find support in some vast historical pattern for a hope without which the outlook might be too gloomy, too pessimistic.

## DISCUSSION

ROSEN Speaking about the anti-historical forces, how would you account for the fanatical stress on personality you get in Belinsky and Dostoevsky, the stress on the uniqueness of personality? Dostoevsky says, and Belinsky too for that matter, that if the whole world can become utopia, but at the cost of a single child suffering, then utopia is not worth having. How does that fit into this picture?

BERLIN Well, Dostoevsky was anti-historical. Belinsky is a more complicated story. Belinsky began by believing in the categories of history and then was revolted by what ultimately revolted Dostoevsky too. But the point must be made that he was always passing between, on the one hand, belief in free will in history and, on the other hand, the belief that Western scientists could not be so deeply wrong, and there must be a pattern there, perhaps not quite so horrible a pattern as he was led to believe during his Hegelian period under the appalling bullying of Bakunin (which is where he got his Hegel from, for he did not read German). He revolted against this, but Dostoevsky (I ought to have mentioned it before, perhaps) is a consciously anti-historical thinker, who does not emphasise the Christological character of history, as, say, Bossuet does, or Hegel. There is, of course, a lot of Messianism in him – and also the Third Rome and so forth – and Russia is for him the God-bearing nation which will liberate the world, yet there is no date fixed for this: one day, when men are good, when Russia performs her sacred task. Yet I wonder – I may be wrong – even in Dostoevsky, together with the belief that utilitarianism is wrong, and that scientism is wrong, there is a good bit about Russia's historic function, for instance in Constantinople, and about the function of the Slav nations vis-à-vis the world, and this is a historic function; it is the fulfilment of a pattern laid up in heaven by which Russia is to be the bearer of Christianity to the world, and that is a very historicist belief.

No, I was wrong. When I started to answer your question I was slightly run away with by the memory of the man who wanted to return the ticket, by Ivan Karamazov.<sup>20</sup> All that Dostoevsky is

<sup>20</sup> 'When, in the famous passage, Ivan Karamazov rejects the worlds upon worlds of happiness which may be bought at the price of the torture to death of one innocent child, what can utilitarians, even the most civilised and humane, say to him? After all, it is in a sense unreasonable to throw away so much human bliss purchased at so small a price as *one* – only one – innocent victim, done to death however horribly – what after all is one soul against the happiness of so many? Nevertheless, when Ivan says he would rather return the ticket, no reader of Dostoevsky thinks this cold-hearted or mad or irresponsible; and although a

arguing against is utilitarianism. All he is arguing against is secularism and faith in science. All he is arguing against is the primacy of happiness – the belief that the happiness of mankind is a sufficient reward to make up for spiritually wicked acts. But he does believe that history has a goal, that this goal is spiritual in character, and that any attempt to barter the soul of a single child for the happiness of untold millions is not only immoral, because it is against Christian ethics, but also unlikely to succeed, because God is good and history follows a divine pattern. And therefore I am wrong. After all, Dostoevsky is to be included as at any rate influenced by this view – but in a very, very loose way, because people who believe that history is a religious drama, which follows certain stages, do not give dates and do not look for empirical evidence of whether mankind has or has not reached a given stage. In some Bossuet-like sense he is a historicist, but in a very large sense in which no specific empirical evidence is relevant.

ROSEN I just want to supplement. How do you explain, in terms of this pattern, the fact that Dostoevsky decides that Ivan Karamazov kills and does not kill the father? He is not much of a Smerdyakov. Who, then, is Smerdyakov?

BERLIN Why does this come into the question of historicism?

ROSEN Purely in terms of what the intelligentsia are like. Why does Ivan Karamazov have to have a Smerdyakov to kill the father? Why cannot Ivan do it himself? Is this in terms of Russian history?

BERLIN No, I don't see what it has to do with Russian history at all. I don't see what it has to do with Russian history in particular. Why should it have anything at all to do with Russian history rather

long course of Bentham or Hegel might turn one into a supporter of the Grand Inquisitor, qualms remain' (L 338). Dostoevsky wrote: 'too high a price has been placed on harmony. We cannot afford to pay so much for admission. And therefore I hasten to return my ticket of admission.' *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. David Magarshack, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth, UK: 1958), i 287.



than English history or Latin American history? The same situation could occur anywhere, could not it? Smerdyakov is a casualty, because Smerdyakov is the revenge of God upon the father, because Smerdyakov is the product of hideous conditions, of frightful lies, falsifications. But this can happen to any human beings anywhere. And Smerdyakov is partly the product of materialist cynicism on the part of the father, and, of course, the Russian intelligentsia are, according to Dostoevsky, affected by this, and to that extent it is anti-progressive – anti-left-wing. But it is not historicist or unhistoricist, I should have thought. But I don't know; I am not an authority on Dostoevsky. This is the opinion of only one reader.

SCHWARTZ I know this is really a lecture about Russia, but I was a little bit uneasy about your assertion that historicism has not really had an impact in the West itself. It seems to me that right now in the West historicism is still a dominant trend. Let us take the whole notion of the process of industrialisation. It so dominates our social sciences and economics. You'll find it expressed in the most diverse areas – it is almost taken for granted. Now this, to my mind, is definitely a historicist notion. You know, everything is the function of the stage in the process of industrial development, and presumably it all has a goal in the achievement of a certain plateau of high industrial society. So it seems to me – I don't know – it seems to me historicism is still dominant in the West in the middle of the twentieth century.

FAINSOD Imperatives of industrialisation, stages of economic growth.

BERLIN Yes, perhaps it has happened in the West to a certain extent, and this is a curious revenge of Russia upon the West. I was thinking mainly, I admit, of the nineteenth century, but what you say is true. This kind of sociology of dominant – that people are dominated by the idea of the inexorability of certain industrial patterns, particularly, I suppose, backward nations, who seek to go

through the same stages themselves, in order to get to the same point as advanced societies – but I wonder if this is historicism. If you simply say that in order to get to such and such a point, to which you need not get if you do not want to, you must act thus and thus – this is only an indication of the means to an end which is not inevitable. Of course, if you *want* to be industrialised, you must want to be powerful; but this is up to you. You might actually want something else – say a Welfare State, and not a powerful state. But *if* you want to be industrialised, or if you want to be autarkic or powerful or dominate somebody, *then* the proper way of doing it is by stages one, two, three. This is quite different (this is a purely hypothetical imperative) from saying that such and such must happen to us sooner or later, whether we want it or not. Then it emerges as a piece of scientific sociology: in order to get to end X you have to go through stages A, B, C, but you need not set out on this path at all.

SCHWARTZ Well, some Westerners treat it that way, but with others it is an impersonal force that is beyond our control.

BERLIN In that case you are perfectly right and what happened in Russia in the nineteenth century has happened in certain parts of the West in the twentieth; and in that case it is perfectly true. And this is, no doubt, the influence of Marxism to some extent, or of modifications of Marxism of various sorts.

THEODORE H. VON LAUE I wonder, is that process of putting everything into a large historical context a typically Russian phenomenon? In regard to industrialisation, the concept comes from List, and in Germany too we find, up to Spengler, up to Hitler, a similar tendency to put everything into a large historical context. List, certainly, thought of the problem of German backwardness, of Germany catching up to the English model, in terms of a universal pattern of historical development. In Spain too, I understand, the generation of 1898 suddenly discovered that there existed a contrast between Spain and Europe, the same

contrast that you find between Russia and Europe. They too – if we think of Unamuno – suddenly developed sweeping historical theories, pretty much like the Russians, or the Germans, to explain that contrast.

BERLIN Well, yes, I do not for a moment want to deny that there was a good deal of speculation about historical theory in Germany, because, in fact, it was this that affected Russia, and this was the cardinal influence. What I want to know is, to what extent you would say that active German intellectuals, who dominated not only thought but action – in the Russian case we are interested in these people partly, certainly, because without them the Revolution is not conceivable – whether the people who actually dominated action or, at least, who brought forth the dominant ideas, whether these very people literally tried to deduce what was the next step from a fairly rigorous pattern. Surely people did not say to Bismarck: You have reached only stage three and you are already trying to leap to number five – or things of this sort?

VON LAUE It is not as extreme, because German backwardness is not as extreme as Russian backwardness, but if you take the liberals, say, of the 1840s, they do see things in a historical context. Their history was comparative history, as they looked at England and English history. They wanted to know how the English grew great and how the Germans could grow great in the future.

BERLIN Ah, this is not what I mean. Yes, of course they do, that is quite right, but let me make a distinction here. The English too thought of things in a historical context. Burke saw things in their historical context. Disraeli saw things in their historical context. Coleridge saw things in their historical context. But historical context merely means: This is how we are, we have certain traditions, we are this kind of nation, this is what has happened in our past. The natural thing for us to do is to grow in this way rather than that way, because that would be contrary to our national

habits, and also we want to achieve certain goals, and these goals are best achieved by taking notice of the general trend of history.

But that is ordinary attention to history. And, if you like, these are the bases of historically grounded political parties, which regard themselves as a development of the past. This is Michelet, Taine, Mazzini, all those who attach some meaning to the notion of national character: National character must be taken into account, all our ideals must be compatible with our past, the glory of our past, with what we stand for, with the kind of natural psychological or sociological tendencies which are characteristic of us Germans, us Danes, us Portuguese – whoever it may be. That is a comparatively mild thing, which everyone is liable to in an age which is interested in history. The Russians I speak of went much further than this. What they wanted was literally a pattern, an actual pattern from which you could read off the next thing to do; a doctrine which says: Unless history is absurd, B comes after A, after B comes C – and so on. That you do not get, I should have thought, in so sharp a form in Germany or France or England. All conservative parties are historically minded, but not deterministic to this degree.

VON LAUE Yes. The difference there is that the Russians are much further apart from 'Europe' than the Germans. The Russians have to relate themselves somehow to what they see in Europe, in Germany or England, and this, as they stand so far apart, takes a far more extreme form in their own consciousness. It also calls for a far more elaborate historical construction, but the same tendency is at work also in Germany.

FAINSOD If I could restate the question, is there a high correlation between historicism and backwardness wherever it appears?

BERLIN There is a high correlation of historicism and backwardness, because the Russians were backward, and because Marxism controlled them, and because the Revolution occurred.

But this need not be so. You do not get historicism in the Balkans, so far as I know, and the Balkan countries were backward enough. You do not get Balkan thinkers of any kind among them. But historicism? You do not get it even among nationalist Balkan thinkers, not even among the western Slavs, who revive the past, recall traditions, discover and invent epics of the fourteenth or the thirteenth century. You get people trying to invent traditions, or invent a past, or something to be proud of, something to look back to – a source of inspiration, like the Slavophiles – you get that. But you become obsessed by Marx because the Russians are Marxists, and that achieved revolutionary results – because Russia produced the only successful socialist party there was, because of Lenin, because of Stalin, and so on. Clearly, backward nations were and are vastly impressed with this example, and say to themselves: If they have done it, why not we too? If this is how one becomes industrialised, powerful and so on, we too must do it. But this is only my hypothesis. I should not deny you what Professor Von Laue said. I think, of course, the historicism comes from Germany and that a mild degree of what I have described is true of Germany too. It is only a matter of degree. The Germans invented the whole thing, but were not nearly so deeply affected by it. I cannot believe, somehow, that the Germans sat up all night trying to work out in detail what the next step was in the way which Russian Social Democrats in the 1880s quite clearly did.

RICHARD PIPES I should like to bolster the case for your thesis for the nineteenth century, and question it for the twentieth. You unnecessarily let the historians off the historicist hook for the nineteenth century. Of course, compared to the *intelligenty* like Belinsky, Chernyshevsky and Mikhailovsky, professional historians were less preoccupied with historiosophical questions, yet still they were, more so than their Western counterparts. You mentioned Solov'ev, who is a historian's historian; but there is a famous long opening chapter in his *History* which is philosophical. Karamzin has the same sort of chapter, in which he drafts a pattern for Russian historical development. Chicherin, who, in addition to being a

political thinker, was a working historian, very deliberately introduced Hegelian themes into his concept of Russian feudalism. Semevsky, a populist historian, and Kostomarov had theses. It is easier to write the history of Russian historiography as intellectual history than of any Western country.

BERLIN Yes, but I have this feeling about them, and I may be wrong about this, that someone like Solov'ev starts off with a noble introduction of a historiosophical kind because that is what people are thinking in terms of. But then it has no effect upon him particularly

PIPES It does. It does.

BERLIN You think it does?

PIPES Well, it does. For instance, in the case of both these people, but more so in the case of Chicherin – his conception of Russia in the 'appanage period', the belief that there could have been no public law in Russia then, that everything had to be private law, was directly Hegelian, from the Hegelian order of progression from family through clan to state.

BERLIN In Chicherin?

PIPES Yes, in Chicherin. The same reason accounts for the famous 'rotation' theory of Kievan princes, now abandoned. If we may switch to the populists, in the case of Semevsky, his view on the Russian village, the Russian peasantry, was intimately connected with the whole populist view on the peasantry.

BERLIN But the populists were not so terribly metaphysical. I don't know how historiosophical the populists were; they were anti-historicist – the thing about the populists was they were anxious not to be over-deterministic, not to be driven along Comtean tramlines.

PIPES But historicism does not necessarily mean 'determinism'. It means historical development follows a pattern, and a pattern determined a priori, philosophical rather than empirical.

BERLIN Well, but if you believe in a specific pattern which things cannot escape, it must be deterministic, this pattern.

PIPES Belief in historical patterns doesn't necessarily involve belief in historical inevitability; but this is a large question we cannot settle here. The second point I want to make is that it is only in the twentieth century that you get pure historians, for instance, Platonov. Platonov had no traditions.

BERLIN No.

BERLIN But Klyuchevsky is my great example of a man who might be considered the best of all Russian historians (PIPES Yes) – a man who is a straight historian; of course, he imbibes certain Hegelian ideas about the state – even he does, to a certain extent (PIPES Yes) – but these are common currency with all young men who grew up in Nicholas I's time. Chicherin really does try to arrange facts in Hegelian triads – though he is more of a lawyer, I suppose – but in Klyuchevsky you do not find history beating away to a rhythm of some sort, you do not feel the facts are arranged in terms of an obsessive, even mildly obsessive, theory, so that if it does not quite work, if disagreeable facts turn up ...

PIPES And yet still, in the opinion of some twentieth-century historians, Kliuchevsky is very 'uncritical'. He is not considered to be ...

BERLIN Yes, there are some general ideas that he is interested in – all intellectuals, all highbrows in Russia adopt this tone, this attitude. But there is a difference between that and the people who, like, say, Struve, asked: Is there ten per cent freedom in history or

is there not? We must settle this. We must settle this because if we settle it one way then it is disastrous for our political beliefs. Supposing that deterministic Marxists are right, supposing there is not even ten per cent of freedom, then what is the point of being and doing X or Y, which we are exhorted to do? On the other hand, if the ten per cent exists, then forward to our task.

PIPES This brings me to my second point. (BERLIN Yes.) That you did mention. (BERLIN Certainly.) It seems to me that around the 1890s, the early 1900s, there does occur in Russia a revolt against historicism, primarily under the impact of Germany and neo-Kantianism. The notion which Russians travelling through Germany, studying in Marburg and other places, frequently got is that there are two causal orders, almost causal chains, the physical one and the moral one, and that the two are not identical. There is a world of *Sein* and a world of *Sollen*. (BERLIN Certainly, yes.) And this, I think, is the case of Struve and the people around him, who left the Marxist movement and moved into 'idealism' and wrote their important book, *Problemy idealizma*. This work was a break with historicism, which was symptomatic of what was happening to Russia in the twentieth century. I was startled to hear you describe *Dr Zhivago* as a historicist work. It seems to me it is a violent rebellion against historicism.

BERLIN It was a rebellion against a particular form of materialist determinism. It is not a violent rebellion against historicism, I think.

PIPES Is it not?

BERLIN No, and it depends on how one reads it; I agree that there are many ways. I am thinking about the metaphysical passages, those huge neo-Hegelian digressions – sentences which might have been copied out of the works of Hegel himself – about the ascent of man. You may say it is like *War and Peace* – the philosophy has nothing to do with the development of the novel.



But the philosophy is there, in Pasternak. He says that once upon a time men wandered in herds, that they were depersonalised. Then there arose Christianity. With the development of Christianity unimportant persons became important. The fact that Jesus lived in an obscure country and was socially and politically a nobody was vastly significant. The whole idea of human personality and its individual work is born. There is a terrific shift in moral categories: even the sufferings of one innocent man become important. This was for him due to a historical event, the rise of Christianity. Then came Roman Emperors, pock-marked tyrants (which may or may not be a reference to Stalin), who proceeded to ignore this, and trampled on it, and so forth. Nevertheless the human spirit triumphed over this. And the Revolution is accused of not understanding that historical development is the achievement of individuals, that refusal to mouth general slogans, be flattered into some artificial uniformity, is not counter-revolutionary or retrogressive; that the elemental chaos of revolution cannot be reduced to order by mechanical means; creation of depersonalised armies is bound to fail, because man was no longer the *Messenmensch* he had been, and so on.

This stress on new categories – the individual as the only source of values, moral, aesthetic and so on – is very Cohenian. Neo-Kantianism in Marburg in 1912 is not unhistoricist, in spite of the value of *Sollen*. It demands sacrifice to great ideals, which were transcendental, outside time and space, and binding on all men, which was, no doubt, the central position of neo-Kantianism. Nevertheless, they have to be intuited in their historical contexts. And the history of mankind is the history of the pursuit of these ideals, pursued remorselessly, historically and progressively. This is a theory of human progress, by which these universal ideals are gradually understood better and better, and applied to concrete conditions and so forth, so that we are gradually approaching – asymptotically – the unattainable goal towards which the ages flow, the Christ beyond the limits. There is a historical progressivism about neo-Kantianism in this age at this stage.

PIPES But that is really departing very far from your conception of historicism, which you now seem to define as identical with the belief in historical mentality.

BERLIN Well, I don't know that it departs so very much. It's an attempt to make sense of history of a certain kind. You see, what the neo-Kantians tried to do is to establish categories of historical knowledge. This is the chief purpose of people like Dilthey, who are half-related to the neo-Kantians. Hermann Cohen believed that Kant discovered the basic categories of our awareness of the natural world by asking: The world being what it is and its laws being what they are, what must our categories be to conceive the world as we do? But what had been done for natural science was not done for history. And the great task is to do the same thing for history. We must ask: What must our categories be for history to develop in the perfectly law-abiding and intelligible and pattern-following fashion that it does? The neo-Kantians start from the position that there are certain absolute ideals of mankind – moral, aesthetic, *Sollen* – which, from generation to generation, gradually, by application to new conditions, become elucidated, and this explains motives, ends, purposes, the non-causal world, the spiritual path of mankind, the successive phases of the growth of human self-awareness in historical, philosophic thought. These famous centuries in Pasternak's poem, you will remember, must gradually float to their tryst; they are marshalled in an order. The generations do not follow each other in chaos, helter-skelter.

This may be Christian ideology; it is certainly a neo-Kantian sermon – a Romantic, rather fanciful, noble historicism. Nothing follows so far as immediate action is concerned: this is true. But the vision is not unhistoricist. Real anti-historicism is very different. Hemingway really is an unhistorical writer. He really is a writer whom history does not touch. Hemingway's heroes have no brothers, no sisters, no father, no mother, no origins, no past. There is a vacuum round them. This is the very opposite of Pasternak. Apart from his other purposes, he is trying to set his characters in a historical framework. The Revolution as he

describes it, the evolution of opinion as he describes it, is a theodicy: this is how the great elemental forces strike – in a manner which he thought of as at once self-explaining and Shakespearean, fortuitous yet pursuing an inner pattern. There is an extraordinary intoxication with the vast and illimitable nature of the great historical cataclysm through which we have lived – a crucial moment in the human drama – drama, not causal sequence or chance. He gives a very definite – if wildly imaginative – interpretation of history which is anti-Marxist and therefore unacceptable in Russia today, but it is an interpretation. It is very un-Tolstoyan. He does not, like Tolstoy, say: Nobody can tell what the causes are, they are too minute, too numerous, all efforts at explanation are delusive. For Pasternak there is the human individual – Zhivago – through whose eyes the welter can be seen at various levels, as the criss-crossing of intelligible human purposes. Zhivago perished miserably, the good are done in, the brutal dominate, yet, as in Henry James's novels, the soul goes marching on – history is an intelligible process, a vast metaphysical pattern ...

FIELD I do not quite see how the populists of the 1870s, '80s and '90s are historicist in any ordinary sense. The populists like Tkachev, who wanted to forestall history, or Mikhailovsky with his 'History has no aims, but I do, and I mean to attain them.'<sup>21</sup> Or the Danielsons and so on who wanted to translate this into economic, literal economic terms.

BERLIN You are quite right.

FIELD I do not see how (BERLIN You are perfectly right) each of these is historicist.

<sup>21</sup> 'Я – не цель природы, природа не имеет других целей, но у меня есть цели и я их достигну.' ('I am not nature's goal, and nature has no other goals. But I have goals, and I shall attain them.') *Geroi i tolpa* [*Heroes and the Crowd*, 1882] (Moscow, 2011), 39.160.

BERLIN They are not. If I maintained they were, I gave a false impression. They are not historicist, they are anti-. But the point is that their battles are fought against historicists, the field of battle is historicism or anti-historicism, that is all I wanted to say. This is the field on which they give battle. It is of supreme importance to someone like Mikhailovsky to demonstrate that historicists, who otherwise might capture the imaginations of people in Russia, are mistaken; that Darwinism is wrong, Marxism is wrong, Comte is wrong, and so on. Mikhailovsky – and this goes back to Belinsky and Herzen too – claimed passionately that human will does play a part. We can do various things: of course, not everything, there are all sorts of conditions that limit us, there are objective laws that operate, but these laws are not exhaustive of all there is. There is a large field for the employment of human freedom of choice and human liberty; and within it men, according to Mikhailovsky, can act. We can do X or Y if our will is strong enough, our minds intellectually sound enough and so on. This is anything but historicism, you are quite right. But all I wanted to say was that the argument was conducted upon the soil of historicist issues: patterns or no patterns – for these men an acute and an immediate question, and a question with extraordinary political consequences. And this is not the case in the West, it seems to me, to a nearly similar extent. I should not dream of saying Mikhailovsky was a historicist. Of course not. Nor Tkachev either. Except the argument is always historical: Are we free at all? To the extent of ten per cent? Or more or less? In what sense?

FIELD So that if you are a class of men, an intelligentsia, who are out of power, in a strange business, and not going to have any control over the march of events unless some very great change takes place, I think, does not your thinking inevitably take the form of not ‘Who shall be governor and not in Nizhny Novgorod?’, but what history, society, fate and so on holds for it?

BERLIN No, I don't think so. It could have taken the form of a purely moral discussion. It could have taken the form of discussing absolute standards – moral values – with no references to history. People could have said simply – as Tolstoy wanted them to – ‘This is right, this is wrong.’ It could take the form which it took in Germany, of philosophical discussion. Or, for example, of the ethical or aesthetic or empirical kind of talk that dominated the English intelligentsia, say Bloomsbury and its allies in the twentieth century, who were essentially ‘alienated’, intellectuals who did not take much part in the government of their country. Perhaps they could have taken part in this, but they did not. Well, when there are discussions, when E. M. Forster or somebody – who is a typical English intellectual – in 1938, in order to *épater*, in order to cause as much shock as possible, says, ‘if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country’,<sup>22</sup> this is taking up a position with which he intended to annoy people he disapproved of, I suppose. In fact, it did not produce much of a reaction. There were plenty of agonising problems for sensitive Englishmen at this time. There were anxious discussions in the 1920s in England among young people about what morality is, whether moral principles were simply forms of psychological processes, causally induced – whether, for example, Freud was right, and these were rationalisations of psychophysical conditions, or, on the contrary, whether there was an objective realm of moral and aesthetic values. Is there such a thing as goodness, an objective quality of certain things, as G. E. Moore maintained, which it is possible to intuit directly? Or were the Utilitarians right? Was goodness to be identical with happiness, or with satisfaction? Or, on the contrary, was Kant right, who thought there was within us an awareness of an absolute law or duty which all men were able to see, and saw. There was much such discussion of a similarly abstract, unpractical

<sup>22</sup> ‘Two Cheers for Democracy’, *Nation*, 16 July 1938, 65–8 at 66; repr. as ‘What I Believe’ in *Two Cheers for Democracy* (London, 1951; repr. Harmondsworth, 1965), where this passage appears at 76.

kind, nothing to do with problems of actual power and government, which preoccupy the sensitive and critical, and occur on this or that level of abstraction.

My thesis is that in Russia discussion was not in terms of timeless morality and aesthetics, but penetrated by historical questions, because Russians were, by and large, preoccupied with the fate of Russia. They were not preoccupied with the fate of England, or France, or America. They were preoccupied with the fate of themselves as moral individuals; and therefore became historicists or anti-historicists, because no Russian ever argued in a social vacuum. They argued always as Russians. The English did not argue primarily about England as Englishmen. Forster did not say 'speaking as an Englishman', 'we have a specific English problem here', which does not concern Brazilians, Peruvians and so on. He is talking about universal human problems, and talking about them as such; all of them – I mean Keynes, Virginia Woolf, G. E. Moore, Strachey, Leonard Woolf – spoke about universal issues, even if the examples came from English experience. Whereas in Russia they were always inescapably Russian; they say over and over again, or still more often assume, that the only interesting questions are those of their own society: As Russians, living on Russian soil, at this moment of history, what do *we* do, where do *we* go, what should *we*, *our* society, *our* country, be doing? What does the West think of us? Is the West right? When did our paths divide? This is essentially a historicism-flavoured atmosphere. I do not mean historicist in the sense of believing there are laws of history, but in the sense of thinking the most important thing is to settle whether there are. That is my thesis, anyway.

SIEGEL I wanted to ask whether you think that the breast-beating, the inverted narcissism of a man like Chaadaev – you know: Does my country exist? Does it have a past? A present? – all those rhetorical questions: do you think that such an attitude is exclusively Russian and confined to Russia? Fifty years after Chaadaev, in America, Henry James wrote a biography of

Hawthorne in which he said that America hardly exists as a literary subject as a theme for a novelist. It has no court, no state, no Church, no school, no army, as James said, and so on, and the question of the form of the very denunciation – what he really seems to mean is that America somehow does not have a history, in the way, I think, the same way – although he is a different type of man from Chaadaev – in the same way that Chaadaev means this. You go even over to France, in fact, more contemporary with Chaadaev, the same thing: Musset's *Confessions of a Child of the Century* – you get some of that attitude, that France somehow no longer exists, although that is perhaps not quite the same. Then if you go forward here, it is possible to apply such an attitude not only to countries, but to subjects of study. In the early discussions, I think, of the science of sociology in America sociologists would say: What do we really have as a subject, and how can it be defined? Does it have any tradition? Or, another example, Edmund Wilson in a recent discussion of prose said: How can you write prose in America? There is no tradition. He does not want to write academic prose or the sort of prose that is printed in avant-garde magazines. He does not have at his disposal the sort of tradition that he would have in England. Or, to take a different example on a larger scale, not confined to a country but to a whole sex: Simone de Beauvoir's book suggests that women somehow do not have a past, or a present, and the future is blank, too. So it seemed to me that this is not just a Russian thing, but a general thing, this inferiority complex. This driven state would not be just confined to Russia, although that is a striking example, but would come any time when this problematic was in the air, when one lost a certain confidence.

BERLIN Well, I did not want to bring America into it, but I could have done. It was present in my mind. This would not be at all true of France. But America – you are very likely quite right, because of a certain similarity of conditions. This talk about: We are young, we are fresh, we are barbarous, but we have not anything of our own, is not there something we can offer Europe? They look on

us as a lot of *nouveaux riches*, we are *nouveaux riches*, we are new and fresh and morally much purer and so forth. You are finishing, we are beginning. Yes, certainly; there is a strong similarity, and the same phenomenon occurred here, in a smaller degree, as in Russia. America shows this self-conscious attitude, this love and hate of Europe.

SIEGEL And to further that, about what it is that we as Russians have to give to the world, Wilson – Edmund Wilson is even driven, in a book about Europe, *Europe without Baedeker*, to defend American plumbing, and to say that we do have the hot bath, we do have toilets that work, and it is better than European cathedrals, it is something they could learn from us.

BERLIN Henry James is a good example, because when Henry James and his friends sit in New England somewhere around the turn of the century, and worry about Nebraska – Is it going to breed a lot of vigorous, coarse barbarians who are going to extinguish this New England culture, which is what we live for? – and ask anxiously: What can be done about civilising these new men, what can be done about bringing these raw characters on the frontier into the framework of American civilisation? Otherwise something terrible may happen: there is a tradition which we must preserve, which we stand for, and what is the future of America going to be, how can we continue the line of our culture and our past? And so on: this is a very Russian mood, and offers a genuine analogy.

Well, what he says is that many more creative ideas of a powerful kind were conceived in American bathrooms than in decrepit European houses. This is exactly the same aggressive, defensive note. It is perfectly true, and there is an analogy. You are quite right. I don't think it's true about France. When Musset deplores the condition of France, or Michelet or anybody else does, when they say France, they mean the world. The Russians are always comparing themselves to something else. Whereas France to the French means the world of men, mankind. It is something



to do with being latecomers to the feast, and with being people whose whole historical position is questioned by other people. It is something to do with the Germans, but that is exactly my whole thesis. That is, the Germans in the eighteenth century were, in some sense, looked down upon; they had been defeated. The Americans, rightly or wrongly, in some sense, are not confident enough – not independent enough. Where are the great American composers? Where is the great American novel? Where are the great American painters, sculptors? Are there truly American schools of thinkers, architects, biologists? Is it mere chauvinism to demand them? Are we doomed to remain the disciple of Europe, proclaiming our superiority? Perhaps we have something better than they have. We may not have their experience, or genius, but we have purer hearts, deeper wisdom, the immemorial wisdom of the simple peasant ...

STUDENT I can see how backwardness can be offered as an explanation of a nation's greater interest in such questions, but I do not see how it follows that this creates a greater weakness for finding a gadget answer in terms of a stage theory, in terms of the ideas to which these Russians were to adhere. What explains their particular weakness for these theories – merely the desire to find some?

BERLIN I am sorry, weakness of, or weakness?

STUDENT Weakness for these ...

FAINSOD Their susceptibility.

BERLIN Then why ...?

STUDENT Well, it seems to me that all nations are backward relative to their aspirations. All nations have an interest in the future, yet the intellectuals of all nations do not fasten upon these sorts of theories.

BERLIN No, but everyone's aspirations are directly conditioned by a relationship with other nations, affected by the fact that these others seemed to look down their long noses at the backward Russians; and therefore by a desire to get even and then overtake: with a faith, born of resentful admiration, that these others have the secret of success, that one must follow in their footsteps, that only one – their – road leads to the desirable goal.

STUDENT Yes, but the significance of this is that it creates an interest in mapping the future – is not this so? – which leads then ...

BERLIN Oh, everyone is interested in mapping the future, certainly, but only the Russians believed that the proper technique of mapping the future is by plotting the past.

STUDENT But backwardness does not necessarily explain this.

BERLIN Well, but backwardness sharpens the desire for a better future.

STUDENT And so what you are arguing then is that the greater the desire the greater the susceptibility.

BERLIN Yes, certainly. The greater the frustration the greater the susceptibility. I mean that the more frustrated they are, the more passionate the wish to break out – desire grows on its own frustration, to some extent.

BENNET Is the frustration a product largely of backwardness or is it a product of living in a decadent, despotic situation, with the lack of practical, practicable alternatives.

BERLIN They are not disconnected, these two. I mean general backwardness is both the cause and the effect of an inefficient and

backward government. But in part the frustration is also due to this singular lack of a native intellectual tradition, which to some extent would deflate the value of foreign importations. The peculiarity of Russia is that when ideas did come from the West, there were no native counter-theories with which these things could mingle or with which they could conflict. Not many, at least.

BENNET Does this plunge you into historicism automatically, or do you just happen coincidentally to adopt historicism because that is the European idea ...?

BERLIN You adopt historicism partly because you want to get on. But what I wanted to say was that you become particularly susceptible to it because you are humiliated. It explains your failure and *their* success: and it offers you a path of salvation by emulation. But also, of course, historicism found fertile soil in Russia because her intellectual awakening coincided with the Romantic movement, which embodied a great deal of historicist thought. I do not wish to deny that the Romantic movement and the awakening in Russia may be products of the same ultimate causes. This may be so: but it is too large a subject to begin on at this hour. But if Russia had been awoken by some other cause – supposing that Russia had suddenly been plunged into Europe in, say, the seventeenth century – that phenomenon – I mean historicism – would not have acquired such an influence. Suppose that history had taken quite a different turn, that Louis XIV had called Russia in against some enemy – Germany, the Turk. Suppose that the Emperor Alexis had poured troops into Europe. Is it not thinkable that Russian political development would have taken some non-historical form? That Russians would have read Racine and Molière and Bossuet, instead of reading a lot of Schiller and Hegel and Fichte, and that this would have produced quite other results? To that extent, what occurred is genuinely a coincidence. Not necessarily an accidental coincidence, but a coincidence.

PETER KENEZ This is only a detail question. Would not we have to regard Bakunin, at least Bakunin's theoretical writings, as historicist, because he explicitly accepted Comte's stages of development?

BERLIN Well, he explicitly accepts them and ignores them in practice. It's true, of course, he makes a bow to Hegel first and to Marx later. But when you actually ask what Bakunin was doing – even before Nechaev and all that – you will see that Bakunin's programme was simply to blow things up, to make revolution. He did not say: *This* is the right hour to strike: the nineteenth century is the historically appointed time; or: This stage of economic development alone makes it possible to make a great final revolution: this would have been impossible in the eighteenth century, we may not be able to make it in the twentieth, *this* is the moment. There is none of that in Bakunin.

KENEZ Could not this be explained away by saying that now the entire world, every country, arrived at the right stage of development, and therefore revolution is possible everywhere and anywhere?

BERLIN He did not quite think that. He thought that only those countries were ripe where there were enough desperadoes, enough people who had no stake in existing societies. And if it is the case that only some societies are more suitable for this, for historical reasons, then he does not bother to explain it. His judgments seem very empirical, very ad hoc, based on the social atmosphere. He does not, for instance, think there can be a revolution in Sweden. You remember, he tries to go to Poland to take part in the revolution of 1863; the British boat takes him to Sweden and does not take him any further. And then he complains that the situation in Sweden is quite hopeless. The Swedes are horribly contented. There is no revolutionary spirit here. It is impossible to arouse them. There is not the slightest chance of anything happening here. The Swedes are no good. Why are the Russians some good?

Because in Russia, according to him, you have absolutely landless, impoverished peasants, thrown into worse chaos by the Emancipation. There is a great ferment going on. Out of such people one can form shock troops. And one can form shock troops in other countries with desperate, lawless men – Spain, Italy and so on. Therefore backward countries are more suitable for revolution than other countries. But this is the discovery of a practical revolutionary who said: I want cadres, I want people with whom to upheave society. Give me enough desperadoes, and I shall turn everything upside down. There are no Swedish desperadoes available. But there are Russian desperadoes, there are Spanish desperadoes, and so on, no doubt for historical reasons. But that is not in itself a historical theory; although it is, I suppose, a sociological one. Give me the weapons and I could do so and so. And then you say: Well, where are they? And I say: Wherever they are – the desperate men, the economic crisis – there I can operate. I do not know how he explained the failure of Chartism. Stupidity of the leaders, I expect.

KENEZ It seems to me that he got away from historicism at the expense of consistency.

BERLIN Who?

KENEZ Bakunin.

BERLIN Oh, but Bakunin was the least consistent being who ever lived, nor did he care in the least. He loved ideas, but just for their effectiveness in action: logic bored him, though he did not lack it. No one was ever more irresponsible as far as intellectual concepts are concerned. It is part of his gaiety and charm.

VON LAUE According to your thesis, then, those elements in Russian society that were relatively contented, say the liberals after the turn of the century, or after 1905, showed the least inclination for historicism, because they accepted life as they found it. I am

not sure whether what you said applies to the Milyukovs; there is less of the tendency it seems to me. (BERLIN Yes.) How about Tolstoy also? Is he now a historicist, or does he belong to a category like ...?

BERLIN They are both anti-historicist. Tolstoy is a bold anti-historicist. Tolstoy says that our learned men, the progressives – he uses the term *progressisty* as a term of great contempt – are always telling us about history. Well, what they are saying is empty nonsense. If you look at what they are saying, they are using hollow words: throwing dust in our and possibly their own eyes. Tolstoy is a conscious, perverse, enjoying opponent of the prevailing tendencies of his time. But he is not irrelevant to my thesis. What is so interesting is that here is this great novelist, not principally interested in history, writing about human life in some universal fashion; but because he is a Russian he finds it necessary to adopt a position vis-à-vis historicism; to develop an elaborate deterministic theory which has irritated the literary critics so deeply ever since.

VON LAUE Well, he did not always ... certainly in *War and Peace*, but in the later, moralistic novels, does he ...?

BERLIN Well, he goes on talking about it. In the moralistic stories not so much, perhaps, but he goes on discussing the subject. He goes on talking about the nonsense which historians talk, the frightfulness of sociologists. He makes anti-scientific remarks until his death. Some of his sharpest attacks on historicism are in the educational writings of the 1870s in *Yasnaya Polyana*, which is a private journal, where he keeps on mocking at every form of advanced German theory, whether in sociology, or in education, or in history. It is all absolutely nauseating to him, nauseating and ludicrous. He thinks the whole thing is a fraudulent invention of a lot of professors. In the 1880s and '90s, I think, he forgets about it, tries to preach truths of a timeless kind – this at the very moment at which hot discussions about history are occurring; about

revolution versus no revolution, gradualism versus violence, and so forth. The only thing which obsesses Tolstoy at that stage is the extreme undesirability of revolution. He says, at the turn of the century, what a pity it is that some of Herzen's works have not been published. Here is a man who went through these phases, believed in historicism, walked to the brink of the revolutionary abyss, saw that this would not do: he should be read more; it would sober up our intelligentsia quite a bit. How stupid the government is not to publish Herzen's works. They are the best antidote to the revolutionary spirit which is destroying our youth – and to the historical revolutionary spirit, what is more.

VON LAUE How about the liberals, Milyukov, and his associates after the turn of the century?

BERLIN Well, I don't think Milyukov was ... Milyukov was a very competent historian, as you know. And to that extent, not very historicistic.

VON LAUE My question was whether he was a historian or non-historian historicist – because he was a liberal, and because he was satisfied with the events as they were developing in Russia, and looked for a natural evolution of Russian politics towards a constitutional regime. He did not belong among the 'existentialists', let us say, the dissatisfied, insecure individualists who needed elaborate historical constructions to find their place in the world.

BERLIN I do not know whether he was ... was he all that contented? He was rather smug, and somewhat self-satisfied – that I should not deny, but I don't know, I think Milyukov was prevented from being historicist by his extremely accurate academic knowledge of history, to a large extent. All those lectures in Bulgaria and so on. I do not know, perhaps this is unfair – Milyukov is surely a typical Western professor, who was aware of the complexity, the devious paths of human history. He was not

by temperament liable to any intellectual fanaticism. Moreover, because he was a historian by profession, he was not liable to be run away with by ideas which obviously were not borne out by enough historical evidence.

VON LAUE I think there is some tie-in with the liberal politics, the liberal attitude to the Church.

BERLIN I should not deny it. Yes, maybe.

FAINSOD Well, Isaiah, thank you very much for a fascinating afternoon.



# The Russian Preoccupation with Historicism

(Sussex 1967)

ISAIAH BERLIN [...] who have come to listen to me, and that is that I tend to talk in a low voice, rather rapidly, which is a habit which I cannot altogether cure myself of, not for want of trying. And therefore if people at the back cannot hear me, and wish to hear me – on those assumptions, I would be grateful if they indicated this by some mild eccentricity of behaviour such as lifting their hands or shuffling their feet, or otherwise displaying signs of slight impatience and irritation, in which case I'll do my best to accommodate myself. I can't promise. Of course I assume that these words of mine can be heard at the back. If not, these remarks are somewhat self-defeating.

THE SUBJECT on which I wish to speak, 'The Russian Pre-occupation with Historicism', was deliberately chosen: the Russian preoccupation not with history, but with historicism – that is to say, with theories of history, with the philosophy of history, with the laws of history, with the patterns of history. It seems to me that this is one of the motifs which runs through Russian history, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (about which I intend to talk), and is therefore relevant to the atmosphere in which the ideas out of which the Revolution sprang were bred. To this extent it is not altogether irrelevant to the general subject of these lectures. But I have to admit to you that, even if it were irrelevant, I should still be talking about this subject.

I should like to begin with a paradox which I have stated before, and if anyone thinks that it is false or exaggerated I should be grateful if somebody will take this up with me during the question period. The proposition is this: it appears to me that in the region of social and political ideas, and in general outside the range of natural sciences or exact ideas, the Russian people have generated no original ideas at all of any kind. This is a startling statement, but

I know of no exception to it. You might say, perhaps, that the idea of the *mir* or the village commune has a certain originality, but the Poles claim even that. Some might think that non-resistance to evil as preached by Tolstoy had a certain originality, but this after all was a Christian idea to which Tolstoy gave new force and life, and which he would not have claimed to have originated.

What is typical of the Russians is that, at any rate in the period of which I speak, which is the early nineteenth century, when ideas do come to them from other sources, let us say from the West, they genuinely look upon them with fresh eyes, undisturbed by any intermediate media. They see these things face to face and not through spectacles of tradition or convention. They see them very freshly, and if they think them true, they believe in them, and since they believe in them, they act them out, they take them seriously, which is a very rare phenomenon. An idea which is taken seriously is transformed, and in their history the Russians transform ideas which come from the West – I don't say out of recognition, but they give them flesh and a concreteness which makes them dynamic and new, and in this form they ricochet again to the West in a renewed and altered form.

This is the cultural function of the Russians in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth. If you ask yourself why this is, well, there are many explanations. And I can advance some of the more familiar of these; and if they are truisms, I apologise.

You must remember that there is no scholastic tradition – or very little – in Russian culture, by contrast with the West. The Byzantine Church, which drew the great curtain of the religious schism that divided Russia and the Balkans from Western Europe, did not contain a scholastic or intellectual tradition at all like that of the West. Consequently there is in the Russian Church no tradition of logic, no tradition of learning, no tradition of elaborate scholarship, no tradition of intellectual exertion. There is holiness; there is sanctity; there is dedication; there is mysticism; there is a great deal of holy living, but very little intellectual effort, with the result that there is no Reformation, no Renaissance to speak of. And because these things didn't occur, there is an absence of the

kind of glaxis or incline that you will find in Europe, particularly after the Reformation, when you see a sort of graduated scale: at the top the most educated, the sharp intellects, the most distinguished intellectual forces, and then by gradual descent you come down to the ignorant and the uninterested; but intermediately there are all kinds of persons in various stages of literacy.

This was not the case with the Russians. At all periods there never was more than a small elite at the top and a vast mass of ignorance, poverty and lack of interest below. And in this respect Russia does differ from the West for various social and historical causes which I am not competent to go into. That is one thing. There is no intellectual tradition and therefore there is no general climate of ideas.

Secondly – these facts are very familiar and I apologise for even mentioning them – the great breach which Peter the Great made took the form, as you know, of sending young men into Europe. This was the biggest and most successful attempt at violent modernisation made in modern history before Lenin, or perhaps before the Japanese. The young men went to France, to England, to Denmark, to Holland, to Germany and to other countries of the West in order to acquire Western arts and sciences and come back and apply them in their vast and barbarous land. The very fact that they learnt the languages of these countries, and by a rapid process of forcing injected into themselves the various arts and crafts of the West with which they were not familiar in Russia, divided them from the great mass of Russian people, and they became an educated elite cut off by the knowledge of foreign languages, by the new habits which they had acquired, by their very education from the vast weltering mass of peasants over which they were set and which they were told to organise and to govern.

And so, already in the eighteenth century, there is this curious phenomenon of alienation or cut-off-ness whereby a small group of persons inspired by Western ideals is cut off from the peasants almost to the degree to which their British governors were cut off from the Indian masses in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

They hardly even spoke the common language of the governed. This vast gap between the small governing group and the huge mass of persons governed by them creates a very peculiar situation. Russia is a barbarous land with no real tradition: first, as Chaadaev was afterwards to say, wandering Slavic tribes; then acceptance of the heritage of an already ossified, decaying Byzantium; then the fearful disaster of the Tatar invasion, which shuts the Russians off for two centuries at least; then the gradual climb back into a normal political existence with none of the advantages of the slow and comparatively healthy organic development of Western countries. And in addition the schism cuts them off culturally too.

The group of persons trying to govern this vast nation tries to push them through various stages in a very rapid and sometimes very brutal fashion, which Peter initiates. This process bogs down to some extent in the middle of the eighteenth century and loses its tempo. Educated persons who read French, German and other European languages, who imbibe the progressive ideas of the West, and who read Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, meditate applying all this to Russian conditions, but realise that these conditions are recalcitrant, that it is impossible to put these ideas into practice in a country which is so unmanageable – a vast mass of peasants for whom the ideas were not created and to whom they cannot be simply applied.

There is a double result: in the first place a disillusioned cynicism on the part of people who know where the truth resides, are enlightened in their ideas, know that the typical principles according to which their country is governed are reactionary and probably inefficient, accept the heritage of the West but are disenchanted, unable to apply it to their own country, and fall into a curious kind of cynical detachment. There is this peculiar phenomenon in the eighteenth century of the educated Russian nobleman who on the one hand reads Voltaire and Montesquieu and Helvétius and Holbach and believes them, but on the other hand whips his serfs and lives a thoroughly brutal feudal life. These two things conflict. Alternatively there are the few idealists who try to alter matters and are punished for it. Where the parents are

cynical and disillusioned, the sons are filled with guilt. This is an invariable phenomenon. Where the parents are insincere or broken, the sons do not grow up in a straightforward fashion. This is on the whole true of the younger generation of the more enlightened and morally more sensitive persons who are born in the 1770s and grow to manhood in the 1790s and a little after.

You then have the great phenomenon of the Napoleonic wars, which suddenly thrust Russia into Europe. This vast giant suddenly appears, at once despised and feared by Europe, regarded as barbarous and dangerous, but at the same time bowed to, at the same time vast and powerful, with the biggest army at that time in the world – a curious combination of a feared, despised nation filled with a huge inferiority complex towards the West, and at the same time with a kind of wounded pride in the face of Western slurs and snubs, and the obvious contempt and distrust which the West feels for it. This is a very complex condition to be in.

The Russian officers make their famous promenade to Paris in 1814/15. They come back imbued with comparatively civilised and liberal ideas. The very conditions of army life bring them into closer contact with their peasant brothers, to whom perhaps most of them had not given any thought before. This creates at once a sense of solidarity with the Russian people, as a part of the general patriotic afflatus of a defensive war and the actual physical proximity with these peasants, from whom they were earlier kept apart by social conditions; and also a fearful guilt about the vast gap which obviously exists – socially, personally, morally – between them and the unfortunate, ignorant, suffering, squalid masses over whom they are set. These are the seeds of that famous guilt of the repentant nobleman about whom Russian novelists write in the nineteenth century.

This is a brief introduction to the general moral and intellectual condition of the educated Russian classes at the outset of the nineteenth century. In civilised countries, in France – in Paris – there are a great many theories competing with one another at the same time. There are socialist ideas, conservative ideas, liberal ideas, clerical ideas, anticlerical ideas, various explanations of the

failure of the French Revolution, various ideas in favour of and against the French Revolution – all kinds of theories, doctrines and doctrinaires meet in the salons of Paris and to a lesser extent of Germany. These ideas knock up against each other and therefore create what is called a climate of opinion. None of these ideas becomes dominant. Everyone who hears or reads about any of these ideas is at the same time assailed by other ideas which to some extent offset and neutralise them.

Russia is a huge vacuum, a great fresh nation, unexhausted, powerful, conscious of its inferiority, eager to learn, with virtually no culture of its own to fall back upon, with a wounded pride, attempting to show that perhaps its history is not quite as gloomy as some people might suppose it to be, or not so empty. At the same time there was both natural respect for these Western values, and a reaction against the Western contempt for Russians – Western grandeur and disdain. Russia had very few ideas to compare with other ideas, so that if any idea wafts across, if somebody brings a book through the censorship, if somebody expounds something which he has heard in some salon or cafe in Paris, this encounters no resistance. So these ideas grow and grow to a far greater height, they become much more dominant and obsessive, than in their countries of birth.

This is what makes the Russians peculiarly susceptible to the influence of ideas, sometimes very fourth- and fifth-rate ideas, which, in the total absence of other ideas in this kind of vacuum, grow and become an enormous factor in their intellectual development. People read Saint-Simon, Fourier, Proudhon, other French writers – mainly French socialist writers, who are the most exciting writers at the time, but also German idealists and the like – and then proceed to try to live them. Nobody ever tried to live the ideas of Fourier in France, but in Russia they did, with the result that some of them were condemned to death.

This is unusual. Fourier would have been astonished to hear that people in Russia were prepared to face death rather than give up Fourierist ideas. No doubt he would have been delighted, but also surprised; he certainly did not expect it, and although he was

a monomaniac and believed in his ideas, perhaps, with a greater fury and a greater intensity than almost any other thinker who ever lived, this was more than anybody in France could have hoped for. The same is true of Saint-Simon and the other French thinkers. Dostoevsky was condemned to death for this (though he didn't suffer this penalty). The other members of the Petrashevsky circle were exiled for reading and preaching Saint-Simon, and not merely Saint-Simon, but all kinds of minor fourth-rate thinkers. Who ever read Pierre Leroux or D ezamy or Cabet with the attention that the Russians gave them? Any little book which appeared to them to contain the truth was fallen upon with absolute passion.

Herzen has some very interesting ironical pages – partly ironical, partly affectionate – describing this phenomenon. These books used to arrive secretly in the double bottoms of smuggled trunks, and they used to be almost torn from hand to hand. The pages used to drop out of all kinds of nineteenth-rate German metaphysicians, all kinds of thirteenth-rate French socialists, who were believed in, suffered for, adored, and who altered people's lives. This is a somewhat exaggerated version of a phenomenon which nevertheless undoubtedly occurred at that time.

There is one more thing I must mention here, and that is the impact of the Romantic movement upon the Russians in this period. I must apologise to you: I can't compress the contents of the Romantic movement into two or three minutes, as I now propose to do. The only point I wish to extract from this vast welter of ideas is this. Towards the end of the eighteenth century there arose in Germany a general movement of ideas according to which the members of each nation, of each group or association of human beings, were bound to each other not merely by ties of utility or self-interest, but by some so-called 'organic' connection in virtue of which they belonged to each other, and were called one nation or one culture or one Church. Some stress links of language, some of soil, some of a common heritage or common tradition, but the general idea, so familiar to us now, of belonging to a group was largely invented by German thinkers, particularly Johann Gottfried Herder, towards the end of the eighteenth century.

Whenever a nation or a group of human beings finds itself in some inferior condition in relation to some other group of human beings – perhaps ‘whenever’ is too strong a generalisation, but at any rate frequently when this occurs – there is a tendency on the part of the group which feels inferior, less happy, which hasn’t got the resources or the success or the reputation or the hopes and prospects of the superior group, to ask itself what its prospects are: whether perhaps it hasn’t got something to offer with which it can oppose the claims of the dominant group. The French are obviously the great dominant culture of the European continent of the eighteenth century, and the humiliated Germans therefore have to invent something of their own in order to preserve any degree of pride or dignity at all. So the notion arises that the French are superficial: they may have all the success in the world, they may dominate politically, financially, culturally, they may be the lawgivers of literature and of the arts, but they are simply a cold, superficial, atomised society, the last relics of a collapsing Roman culture on the way out. We Germans may not have all these advantages: we may not be rich, our poetry may be inferior, our literature may not be as famous or as important, it may be obvious that our financial and political arrangements are far inferior to the great centralised state of the French, but we possess certain merits which these people do not. We possess inner life, depth, seriousness, a religious outlook; we understand what life is about; we live closer to God; we are altogether more human than these dried-out mummies in the French salons, these abbés with their epigrams, these dancing-masters with their polished but hollow phrases.

This is Gallophobia, which you will find in a great many German authors in the 1770s. The same phenomenon occurs among the Russians too. The Germans pride themselves on the fact that, whatever may have happened, they at least did not have a destructive French Revolution, because they possessed more profound natures and understood what human nature and human life were, better than these hollow Jacobins who believed that political reform and a few ringing phrases borrowed from the



works of Rousseau and other revolutionary authors were sufficient to transform mankind. The Russians argued that, if the Germans could say that they were superior in avoiding the Revolution, the Russians had an even greater claim to such superiority. There was no doubt that, whatever tremors might have shaken the German framework during the period of the French Revolution, nothing occurred in Russia at all. It slept a profound sleep, and therefore, if that was a guarantee of a deeper nature or of a more solid altitude to life, the Russians could take pride in that. This is a very sublime form of sour grapes, whereby you say: What they have we don't want; we possess something of our own which is far superior to all these vaunted advantages of the others. This is a very natural reaction on the part of persons at some disadvantage. All emergent nations tend to believe this sooner or later. This is a phenomenon with which we are very familiar in the twentieth century. Perhaps people were not quite so familiar with it around 1780 or 1820. That is why the first emergent nations began to be observed as such when they began to see themselves as being in this frame of mind. And the Russians were tremendous candidates for this position.

The problem that arises for people of that sort is: What can we do? In a world dominated by others, is there room for us? Is there something we stand for? We know what *they* stand for, because they have made it very plain, and other people accept their hegemony in that respect. What do *we* stand for? The first Russian author to raise these points in a sharp, acute and disagreeable form is the famous Chaadaev, with whom I expect you will all be familiar, who was an army officer, contemporary and semi-involved with the Decembrist conspiracy. He was a contemporary and friend of Pushkin. He was a very elegant, extremely handsome man of very good breeding and education with inclinations towards religious mysticism, about whom Pozzo di Borgo, the famous French diplomat of that period, said he was 'un russe parfaitement comme il faut'.<sup>23</sup> Chaadaev could enter any drawing

<sup>23</sup> Mikhail Ivanovich Zhikharev, '**Dokladnaya zapiska potomstvu o Petre Yakovleviche Chaadaeve**' (written in 1864–5), in *Russkoe obshchestvo 30-let godov*

room in Europe and be taken for one of our own. There was nothing barbarous, nothing Muscovite, nothing exotic about him – he was a perfect gentleman in every possible sense.

In 1829 Chaadaev wrote the famous, shocking first *Philosophical Letter* (published in 1836), in which he tried to examine the problem of what the purpose of Russia was – Why do we exist? – and he said: We pretend that we are a great kingdom, a tremendous empire, with all kinds of magnificent and enviable attributes. But our history is nothing but these wandering Slavic tribes: Byzantium, Tatars, Poles, foreigners, crushing tyranny, nothing but ignorance, misery and the knout. That is our history. We haven't even a language in which to express ourselves properly. Everything that we have is borrowed. Why do we exist? What is our purpose? If what the Romantics say is true (this is roughly the argument), if every human association is created for some purpose, has some kind of mission, has some inner structure which directs it towards fulfilling itself in a manner which belongs to it, and it alone, what is *our* purpose, what is our *das Aufgegebene*, what is our mission in life? On the assumption that God creates nothing without a purpose, and that every human nation, every human race, every human association is an ingredient or element in some general harmony, what do we contribute to this harmony? He says: It is difficult to say; we are like the blank page between the Old and New Testaments; nothing is written upon us; perhaps we were created as a caution to show nations how not to exist, to show how development was not to occur. He goes on from there to talk about

XIX *v.*: *lyudi i idei* (Moscow, 1989), 48–119, at 57. This memoir was first published as M. Zhikharev, 'Petr Yakovlevich Chaadaev: iz vospominanii sovremennika' in *Vestnik evropy* 71 no. 7 (July 1871), 172–208, and no. 9 (September 1871), 9–54, but without the passage about Pozzo di Borgo (see no. 7, 183), which was paraphrased from the manuscript by Mikhail Osipovich Gershenson in his *P. Ya. Chaadaev: zhizn' i myshlenie* (St Petersburg, 1908), 117 (where this quotation is included), and published in full by Vasily Evgrafovich Chesikhin-Vetrinsky (as 'Ch. Vetrinsky') in 'Melochi o P. Ya. Chaadaev' (where S. P. Zhikharev is wrongly credited as the author), *Vestnik evropy* 51 no. 2 (February 1916), 396–401, at 398.

the great disaster, the schism: if only Russia had been part of the general Western development conducted first in the Roman empire and then by the Roman Church, she would have done better, but unfortunately she was relegated by the schism into a period of complete non-development, and that is why she was crushed, miserable, had nothing to live for.

These are very violent words, and he goes on like this. Chaadaev begins the great tradition of breast-beating on the part of all Russian writers. There are three elements in Chaadaev which afterwards go resounding through the nineteenth and parts of the twentieth century. The first element is this breast-beating. We are miserable. What is our purpose? Perhaps there is none. Should we exist? Would it not be better if we had never been? It is difficult to discover our purpose. Perhaps we are nothing. Perhaps we are detestable. Perhaps they are right to hate us. Perhaps there is something wrong with us – and so on.

The second element, which is closely allied with the first, is a kind of narcissism in which the main preoccupation of Russian writing is Russia. What are we for? Why are we here? What is our character? What is our destiny? This becomes an absolutely obsessive element among, for example, the great Russian novelists. If you read the novels even of so Western a writer as Turgenev, if you read the novels of Dostoevsky or of almost anyone else writing in the Russia of the nineteenth century – both poets and prose writers, but particularly the prose writers – you will find that the obsessive question is always the destinies of Russia, the famous ‘accursed questions’.<sup>24</sup> Should we or shouldn’t we? Should one join

<sup>24</sup> ‘Proklyatyie voprosy’. Although ‘voprosy’ was widely used by the 1830s to refer to the social questions that preoccupied the Russian intelligentsia, it seems that the specific phrase ‘proklyatyie voprosy’ was coined in 1858 by Mikhail L. Mikhailov when he used it to render ‘die verdammten Fragen’ in his translation of Heine’s poem ‘*Zum Lazarus*’ (1853/4) no. 1: see ‘Stikhotvoreniya Geine’, *Sovremennik* 1858 no 3 (March), 125; and *Heinrich Heines Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Oskar Walzel (Leipzig, 1911–29), iii 225. Alternatively, Mikhailov may have been capitalising on the fact that an existing Russian expression fitted Heine’s words like a glove, but I have not yet seen an earlier published use of it.

the West or should one on the contrary delve into our own inner resources and follow some unique line of Slav development which is vastly superior to the rotten West? Should life be lived in the manorial houses of the squirearchy on the backs of the suffering peasants, or should something be done? Should some kind of reform be instituted, or even a revolution, which makes men equal? Should personal relations be preferred to dedication to public life, or should personal relations be pushed aside so long as hideous public problems – poverty, squalor, injustice, iniquity of every kind – face us? And so on. the Russian novels – even, as I say, the most apparently Western Turgenev-like novels – are absolutely chock-a-block with contemporary Russian problems. The only subject in which the Russians take a true interest in the nineteenth century is Russia, and the fate of Russia. Sometimes, when there are men of universal genius such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, this has vast implications for humanity at large, and therefore readers don't altogether notice; but if you read carefully you will see that self-preoccupation is an absolutely obsessive element in Russian writing, to a far greater degree than in literature elsewhere in the world, both for better and for worse.

Chaadaev posed these questions. The breast-beating and self-preoccupation begin there, and also, of course, the attempt to give an answer, because it is after this famous tirade was published, denouncing the Russian past and present and predicting no kind of future, that Chaadaev was declared by the government officially mad. Count Benckendorff, who was the head of the secret police in that period, produced the official line, which is: Our past was splendid, our present is magnificent, and our future transcends all possible belief. This was the official line of the government, and not compatible with the theses of Chaadaev. A doctor was invited to visit him once a week, to take his pulse and otherwise satisfy himself about his mental and physical condition. He was put under what was more or less semi-house-arrest, and was much visited by eminent foreign tourists.

Chaadaev had a very fascinating life in many ways. He said a number of other interesting things, though they are not to the

point here. But in this rather low condition, condemned by public opinion and regarded as a madman and a traitor, he produced a second work in which he said: Perhaps our barbarism has something to be said for it after all; perhaps, if one has nothing, one will gain everything; perhaps (this goes back again to the idea that the Russians haven't had a French Revolution) the West has given everything, but they are exhausted; there is something to be said for us after all – we are fresh, we are barbarian, we are strong, we have enormous appetite. Let them produce, and we shall consume; they will produce culture, but we shall adopt it, adapt it, and develop it; let them have all the sufferings, we shall reap the fruits. This notion that backwardness itself has something to be said for it has certain advantages. That is, you needn't go through all the agonising stages of building things up through various kinds of historical vicissitudes, through the Industrial Revolutions and all the horrors, but can inherit the fruits of that process without undergoing the original pain which led to it.

This, then, becomes a permanent motif in Russian thought. It is behind the idea that one can avoid industrialism and perhaps make something of the village commune. It is behind the thought produced by Chernyshevsky, by Herzen, and latterly by the late Isaac Deutscher, that there is a certain advantage in backwardness, because one can pluck the ripe fruits of other people's endeavours, and start from there, instead of being tied to one's own past by the obsolete machinery and plant which one cannot altogether get rid of if one is an old, developed country like England, Germany or France. That begins with Chaadaev. The idea is this: We are the inheritors of the world; we must have a part to play; we have no past, we have no present, but perhaps we have a future because we are unexhausted, we are barbarous, we are young, we are fresh, we have magnificent powers, and we shall overwhelm the world yet. The kind of atmosphere or mood of which Chaadaev was fairly characteristic was one in which people ask themselves: What is our proper fate? Where should we march?

As I say, this is symptomatic of backward or emergent human societies. It is not the kind of thing which is very likely to be asked

by others. Every Russian writer asks it in some form or another. You don't hear this question among the successful. You don't read Dickens saying: Whither England? You don't find the question posed in the writings of Stendhal: What are the historical destinies of France? It is not even to be found in the writings of Balzac. You don't find Jane Austen asking: What is to be the role of the great British people? What historical stage have we reached, and what follows next? Which way must this great community face? Should we go to the right? Should we go to the left? What fate does destiny have in store for us? This is because these people are perfectly confident that what they believe to be good is good, and what they think successful is successful. They set the tone. It is the others, who imitate, who try to pull themselves along, who are naturally faced by the question: Shall we imitate? Shall we not? Shall we be as Chaadaev portrayed us, miserable apes imitating fourth-rate French literature and producing ninth-rate Russian imitations of it, or should we on the contrary try to generate something original of our own? And how are we to do this, and what have we to go back to, and what is there in our history to help us? And so on.

This is the question which obsesses everyone, and the kind of answers which the Russians give are intimately tied to the view that there must be some framework, some theodicy, some design or pattern in history in terms of which the great country of Russia, my country, the country in which I, Herzen, or I, Chernyshevsky, or I, Belinsky, speak must be intelligible. We must have some part to play, because the proposition that we have no part to play, that perhaps we are, as Hegel supposed, an unhistorical nation – Slavs destined to make no contribution to the great human treasury – is unfaceable. It is too grim, too disagreeable to contemplate this. So there is an attempt, in a country in which religion has decayed, and never had an intellectual tradition in any case, and in which the Church was culturally a somewhat despised institution, whatever part it may have played politically – in a country of this sort there is a desperate effort to create an ersatz metaphysics or ersatz religion or ersatz theodicy in which some guarantee or promise can be found that, if we behave in this and this fashion, we too shall

make our word heard, we too shall be great, we too shall fulfill our nature in some splendid and satisfying fashion. This becomes the prevalent note throughout the nineteenth century.

When, for example, Herzen begins to write his essays on the social conditions of Russia, on what we ought to do and what we ought not to do; when his conscience begins to speak and he begins to denounce the fearful iniquitous, squalid and despotic world in which he lives, the tendency is always to ask historical questions, always to say: Has history a libretto? Perhaps it has no libretto. If history has no libretto, what are we to do? Do we invent our own values, or do we find them laid down in history? Is there some pattern to which we can attach ourselves, or, on the contrary, is there no pattern? Upon this a great deal depends, because if we think there is a pattern, then it makes sense to stimulate a revolutionary movement, and to try to sacrifice one's life to it; but if you can satisfy yourself metaphysically that there is no pattern, that everything which happens, happens as a result of arbitrary human will, then perhaps some other course of action follows.

Belinsky, who is an extremely characteristic example of a tormented Russian proto-intellectual in the 1830s and 1840s, really does attempt to live through the doctrines of the Germans, which he reads first. He lives through Fichte; then he lives through Hegel; then he rejects Hegel because Hegel's theodicy is too brutal and too disagreeable, because it justifies too much shedding of blood, too much torture inflicted by one set of human beings on another. He thinks it is too immoral a picture. If this is what the pattern of history is, then we needn't follow history. Then he becomes reconciled to it – not to the Hegelian picture, but to some other picture – and says: Yes, perhaps there *is* a pattern in history; perhaps industrialism is the thing; perhaps we ought to become bourgeois; perhaps we ought to adjust ourselves to Western conditions; perhaps we ought to reject our present path; perhaps we ought not to listen to what the Slavophiles say. The Slavophiles, on the other hand, produce another pattern, which goes back to Byzantium, Russian roots, Slav Christianity, which condemns Europe for being divided into, on the one hand, the decaying

forms of frightful Catholic hierarchy, the dead hand of Rome, a fearful pyramid of authority which no longer has any meaning, and, on the other hand, the atomised, disintegrating, utilitarian, dry, completely spiritless Protestantism of the other part of Europe. Only in Russia has primitive Christianity been preserved, which crushes people neither with the huge weight of the legal and political despotism of the Roman hierarchy, nor with the disintegrating and atomising laissez-faire individualism of the sadly spiritually dry Protestant countries; and so on

But all these people are not talking in the void. This is not idle discussion in the salons. This is not just empty theorising. These people really tried to live their theories; their lives were governed by them, and their political action, the causes to which they sacrificed their lives, the risks which they took politically, the prisons to which they went, the parties which they tried to form, the defiance which they hurled at the government were literally founded upon a perception of a historical pattern, because they wanted something to prop them up. If it is only I and my conscience, if it is only something which I have thought of myself, this is too dubious, it is not firm enough. They needed some guarantee that there really was an order in the external world in terms of which it was possible to say that, if you behave in this or that fashion, ‘there will be a holiday in our street yet’, as Chernyshevsky said.<sup>25</sup>

In Belinsky’s case it is extremely evident. Chernyshevsky too always argues historically. Chernyshevsky adopts Chaadaev’s view that perhaps the Russians could profit by the industrial achievements of the West without going through the torments. Perhaps there is some route round the horrors of the Industrial Revolution towards socialism which the Russians alone can adopt. We must learn from the lessons of 1848. We must understand that liberalism is not the way. We must understand that parliamentarism

<sup>25</sup> Towards the end of ‘**Kritika filosofskikh predybezhdenni protiv obshchinnogo vladeniya**’, first published in *Sovremennik* 1858 no. 12 (December).



is not the method. We must understand that the real pattern of history is not this, but something else. Then he draws up a pattern of history which he thinks true, and to which he is prepared to sacrifice his life; for which he is prepared to send people to their deaths; for which he is ultimately exiled to Siberia; and to which he loses his life. These people are genuine martyrs and heroes to their historical perception of what the universe is like.

An extremely vivid case of this is furnished by the kind of arguments which they had. I have already mentioned the Petrashevsky Group, who believed in Fourier, and this was not a particularly historical belief. But a little later than that, for example, you will find, not only in the arguments between the Slavophiles and the Westerners – and these arguments are not arguments of an ordinary Western type, namely: What is it best to do? Is it better to industrialise, or is it better to remain rural? Is it more healthy to do one, or more healthy to do the other? – you will find that the argument always acquires a historical form. What are we descended from? What is our nature? To which path of history do we belong? What will develop us along the natural grooves of our historical formation in the most frictionless manner?

When Western statesmen ask themselves questions, they don't do so in this form. If John Stuart Mill asked himself a question about what it was best to do, he simply put the question in an ordinary moral fashion: What will make people happier, or what will be more just, or what will be more efficient? When Bismarck asks questions, when Guizot asks questions, when Thierry asks questions, when English statesmen ask questions, they don't have to pose their questions in terms of some rigid historical framework, so that you can demonstrate the validity of your answer from the fact that a stage in some inevitable development guarantees that it will be a success, and will develop your nature in its proper fashion, if only you can screw yourself into the right historical framework, and not into the wrong historical framework. For the Slavophiles, if you follow the West you are simply perverting your Russian nature. For the Westerners, if you follow the Slavophiles you are also perverting your nature, you are trying to go back to the past, which

is impossible; you are trying to adapt yourself to some imaginary past which these people thought existed before Ivan the Terrible, which is all moonshine. For Khomyakov, on the other hand, if you try to follow Western patterns you are following a path which has already led the Western nations to their doom, and which history has already condemned. So the notion that history stands there encouraging and deterring, condemning and pushing forwards, is already an extremely fixed idea in public Russian thought, in the discussions and the debates both from the right wing and the left wing, the individualists and the collectivists, and everybody else there is, by 1850 or 1860.

Let me give you another fairly vivid example of this. In the 1870s there was a great debate, as you probably know, between two sections of the Russian populist movement, between, on the one hand, the Jacobins, led by people like Tkachev, who believed in elites of professional revolutionaries, and, on the other hand, Lavrov and his followers, who believed in a slower process of evolution and education. This is a well-known debate of which you will find an extremely useful summary both in Venturi's book on Russian populism and in Dan's book on the origins of socialism.<sup>26</sup> These are very good accounts of this interesting debate, whose results were fateful for Russian history.

The argument takes historical forms. Tkachev says: Conditions are intolerable; no country is more enslaved, oppressed and disgusting in every possible way than our great homeland; this can be remedied only by a small group of dedicated professional revolutionaries who do things *for* the people, not *with* the people; the peasants are stupid, reactionary and malevolent, and anybody who ties himself to the peasants goes to his doom. We wish to save the peasants, but of course always against their will. If you listen to what Lavrov says, you will collapse. No body of men is more

<sup>26</sup> Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution* (London, 1960; New York, 1960), to which IB contributed an introduction; F. I. Dan (pseudonym of Fedor Ivanovich Gurvich), *Proiskhozhdenie bol'shevizma: k istorii demokraticheskikh i sotsialisticheskikh idei v Rossii posle osvobozhdeniya krest'yan* (New York, 1946).

degraded or ignorant or stupid than the vast body of peasants whom we are intending to save. You mustn't listen to what they want; you mustn't listen to what they say; what you must do is save them, if need be against their will, if need be by violence.

This is the so-called neo-Jacobin doctrine of Tkachev, who is a disciple of Blanqui, and before him of Buonarotti and Babeuf. And therefore the programme is: Form a small revolutionary elite, arm them, and create a coup d'état; if need be, slaughter; if need be, crush and destroy; if need be, create a dictatorship which will repel all efforts to overthrow it – if need be, for a long time. Against this Lavrov argues that this isn't right, that if this is done the peasants won't like it – which both sides recognised – and since they won't like it, they will attempt to resist it. In the attempt to break their will, even for their own benefit, you will obviously create instruments of repression. These instruments of repression will brutalise you and militarise you – you, the revolutionary elite – and by brutalising and militarising you they will change your ideas; and instead of becoming liberators you will in fact become oppressors, and in the effort to liberate the people you will fix a yoke upon their necks which will perhaps be even harsher than the one you have just struck off. Fateful words.

To which Tkachev replies: You must look at history. There is no other way. All successful revolutions are made by small bodies of desperate professionals and not by huge popular movements, which never quite occur. Lavrov replies: Yes, this is true. There are the Puritans in the seventeenth century, the Jacobins in the eighteenth, but then what happened? These movements were followed by all kinds of fearful collapses, and in the case of France by the *Directoire*, degeneration, the bourgeois republic – everything we hate. To which Tkachev in turn says: Yes, but if you wait, if you try to educate, if you try to make the people democratic, if you try to make the masses of workers capable of understanding what liberation it is that they need, and which we bring to them in a semi-Marxist fashion (which Lavrov preached), then you will find that the state, as so often in the past – the analogies are always historical – will simply buy off your revolutionary intelligentsia.

Where do we get our best cadre from? We get them from engineers, doctors, agrarian experts, students, the frustrated intelligentsia of the towns. If the Russian monarchy has the least degree of wisdom, they will simply offer the doctors practices, they will offer the scientists laboratories, they will offer the agricultural experts land to develop, they will make conditions perfectly peaceful for them, and in this way they will drain off their revolutionary zeal. These people will be bought off by the state, and you will lose the only revolutionaries who could help upset the system. This is what the French have done; this is what has led to the detestable French Republic. Observe what happened in the eighteenth century; observe what happened in the nineteenth; and you will see this is not the path. And so the argument proceeded.

In fact Tkachev needn't have worried. The tsarist regime didn't display even that minimum of intelligence of which he was afraid. And therefore exactly what he hoped for in fact happened. But the point is that the argument always takes a historical form, and they always ask themselves: What stage have we reached? Are we now like the Puritans in the seventeenth century? Is this 1789? Is this 1793? Is this Thermidor? Is this 1815? Is this 1848? Where are we? It is as if there really is some kind of calendar, some kind of objective order of development, and the great thing is to discover on what step of this ladder you are, in order to take the next step, and not make some awful mistake, which could lead you to fall off the ladder altogether – this can happen – or could at any rate retard your progress.

That is why, if you conceive of the Russians as constantly obsessed by historical analogies, which to them are a kind of theodicy or metaphysical framework which guarantees the next step, so that if you learn where you are on the map, then and only then can you take the next step – and the map is a rationally intelligible map, a symmetrical map which not merely indicates how the past has gone but provides a certain principle for the future too – if you see that, then you will see upon what very fertile soil Marxism fell when it finally came to Russia. It was the country of all countries, paradoxically enough, which was readiest to

receive this doctrine, and the intellectuals who received it did so with colossal enthusiasm. And once again there is this phenomenon of argument in terms, always, of some historical framework. Plekhanov, who is the most influential of all Russian Marxists, always begins by considering the question: What stage have we reached? Given that Marx is right, and that there is a certain order of events – first we have feudalism, then we have the collapse of feudalism; we have the early development of capitalism, then we have the later development of capitalism; we have a generation of the proletariat, and so on – where are we? Have we reached late seventeenth-century England? Have we reached early eighteenth-century France? Or are we somewhere behind or in front of these? And the argument proceeds exactly on those lines. The populists are wrong because they don't understand that in the historical development of Russia this inevitable stage must be passed. We must generate a proletariat, otherwise we cannot have a modern revolution, we cannot have socialism, because Marx understands that these are the unbreakable laws of history.

You will see how vivid this is when you consider, for example, the famous letter which Vera Zasulich, one of the Russian populists, addressed to Marx in 1881,<sup>27</sup> in which she asks Marx whether perhaps it is possible, in his opinion, for the Russians to avoid the horrors of industrialism and a huge exploited proletariat; whether there might not be a direct path from the village commune into socialism, avoiding the awful corridor of industrialisation and exploitation of the Western type. To which Marx, naturally enough, answers, rather impatiently at first: What are you asking for? You are asking me to exempt you from the laws of history. I'm very sorry, I can't do that. Like a schoolmaster he says: I can't. You can't leap over these stages. This can't be arranged. In effect, what he is implying is that either his theory of history is serious, or it's not; and if it is, then he can't arrange special exceptions to inexorable historical laws.

<sup>27</sup> See 31.

Nevertheless, you must understand that in that period Europe was not in a condition of any kind of revolutionary upheaval. There was not much revolutionary activity going on in the late 1870s in Europe. After the Commune and so on, everything subsided. The only persons who were doing anything at all were Russian terrorists, who were actually killing governors, and meditating killing an emperor, which they finally succeeded in doing. And Marx was always predisposed towards effective men of action. Although they weren't exactly Marxists, they were heroic, they were dedicated, and they adored Marx. In the end the old man somewhat softened, and he wrote them a letter in which he said: What I wrote in *Capital* about these matters is meant to apply to the West. I wasn't thinking of Eastern Europe at all. But if the revolution in Russia coincides with a general revolution in the world, and particularly in the West; if your revolution touches off a larger revolution, or anyhow if a larger revolution bears you upon its shoulders; then perhaps there isn't any necessity for you to go pedantically through all the stages of European development for the purpose of making your own revolution; you will be borne aloft by the general wave, which you might even stimulate, or of which you would at any rate form a part. Therefore, on condition that there is a general revolution, you might skip this stage, but not otherwise.

This letter was incompatible with what Plekhanov was preaching at that time: that the Russians must accustom themselves to taking history seriously; that it was no good trying to leap over stages; it was no good running about with bombs, or killing governors, or attempting deeds of isolated assassination before conditions were ripe for a proper advance of the proletariat. Either we shall make a revolution with the workers, or we shall not make it at all. Therefore the proper task was not to indulge in individual terrorism, or William-Morris-like agrarian dreams about some happier rural Russia which will avoid the horrors of industrialism. That was a mere piece of reactionary utopianism, however worthy. What we must do is actually almost to help the capitalists in their task of modernising or transforming Russia. That is to say, the

proletarian stage must be gone through, and the faster the better, and therefore we must drive the capitalists faster against the reactionary state into the proper route, which is towards greater and greater industrialisation.

When this letter was received from Marx and held out a ray of hope that this might not be necessary – that if the revolution broke out, let's say, in France or in England, or somewhere in the West, there might be no need for all these horrors – Plekhanov was deeply upset, and he decided to defend Marxism against Marx. In short, what he did was to suppress the letter, which was published for the first time in 1924, when it was no longer of very great contemporary importance. My point is not whether Plekhanov was right or wrong to suppress this letter – many people cannot forgive him for it, and he is regarded as having committed a great breach of revolutionary integrity and so on by doing so. That is not the point. The point is that no other socialist would have had to suppress a letter of this sort. If a letter of this kind, upsetting preconceived ideas, had been sent to M. Jules Guesde, who was a French Marxist, or to Karl Kautsky, or to Eduard Bernstein, who was a German Marxist of that period, or to Marxists in Belgium or Holland, or even in England or Italy, it wouldn't need to be suppressed, but in Russia it had to be suppressed.

Plekhanov was perfectly right, because these people believed faithfully, deeply, first of all in the existence of patterns of history, and secondly in the existence of experts who knew what the patterns were. Some people thought Saint-Simon was such an expert, some that Buckle was, some that Darwin was, some that Marx was. The Russian writings of the nineteenth century teem with statements which begin 'Spencer says', 'Buckle says', 'John Stuart Mill says'. You might want to refute such a statement, but you will always begin with some great Western authority for whom you have the profoundest respect. They know: we don't know. They are the experts; they are the people who know; they have studied the patterns of history; these patterns exist, and there are certain specialists who know what they are.

Therefore, if this letter had been allowed to leak out, the Russian Social Democratic party might have been profoundly demoralised, and might then have ceased from organising itself in the fashion in which it had to organise itself, and young men would have gone on sacrificing their lives in vain efforts to perform terroristic acts, and needless blood would have been shed by people who were far better employed, as Plekhanov thought, in reading the works of Marx, and quietly creating the conditions of a mass party among the workers. I bring forward this example only because I wish to explain how literal-minded the Russians were, and how much importance they attached to *ipse dixit*s of this sort, and to documentary evidence for the existence of a framework which alone justified a specific piece of political action. Nowhere else, except perhaps now in the twentieth century – I can't tell you: perhaps in Asia and Africa it may also be so; I wouldn't know – but at that period nowhere else was there this literal faith in dogmatic pronouncements about the unalterable shape and order and progression of historical steps.

The same thing can be said even about Lenin. The great arguments which went on in the 1890s always took this form. Marx said that we can't make a revolution until certain conditions are fulfilled: for example, until we have in the population a majority of industrial workers who understand their historical position. In 1890 this didn't look very real in Russia, and yet Lenin was an impatient man, and wished to make a revolution soon rather than late, and therefore had to devise extraordinary stratagems in order to prove that, as a matter of fact – and he tried to prove it to himself in the middle of the 1890s – Russia was already in a condition to make a revolution. All Marx said was that you needed capitalist development of a certain kind. Now, peasants were capitalists. Eighty per cent of the Russians were peasants; therefore eighty per cent of Russia was capitalist already. Conditions were ripe. He didn't insist on this so very much after 1902 – he receded in his position – but the mere fact that he had to produce this highly eccentric hypothesis, and apparently believed in it profoundly, is evidence of the fact that there were these continual



arguments about the calendar, about the timetable: Where have we got to?

In 1905 there was an endless argument between Plekhanov and Lenin about the timetable. Are we in 1848, or are we later? Should we make a revolution now, or shouldn't we? What is the condition of the proletariat? Have we reached stage three or stage seventeen? You were allowed to make a revolution according to the book only when you'd reached such and such a stage. The question is: Have we or have we not? If you make the revolution at the wrong moment, Engels said; if you get into power at historically the wrong moment – and there is an absolutely rigid progression of these moments – then woe betide those who do this, because they will find themselves in a place very different from where they intended to be.

The situation in 1917 was exactly that. When the Mensheviks argued against the Bolsheviks about what kind of revolution they wanted to make in 1917, this is the hub and nub of the argument, as it always is. Are we or are we not ripe? The whole notion of ripeness, all these phenomena which are now called imperatives of modernisation or industrialisation, or take-off points, and so forth, begin then. There is an objective order, and one must know exactly what point one has reached. Where do we take flight? Where do we leave the ground? We must judge the moment absolutely precisely, and you can discover it by a huge intellectual operation, by observing history, discovering its laws, and identifying your place upon the great historical ladder. That is what I mean by the Russian obsession with history or historiography, which is, as I say, a kind of theodicy, a kind of ersatz religion, equally powerful, equally influential, equally important in the thought of all these thinkers.

One thing I might add before I stop is that it's fair to say that not all Russian thinkers were equally obsessed in this way. I have given the impression, perhaps, that most Russian intellectuals in the nineteenth century thought like this, and of course a great many did, but some didn't. For example, Bakunin never did. Bakunin was

an anarchist who thought you could make a revolution anywhere, at any time, and with equal success. All you needed were men desperate enough to upset the given regime; all you needed was a group of desperadoes with no stake in existing society, prepared to go to all lengths. Bakunin was perhaps in some ways a frivolous man – this could be said without injustice – an imaginative, interesting, somewhat frivolous man who didn't take himself all that seriously, certainly not as seriously as his followers took him. But the doctrines of anarchism which he initiated in a big way in Western Europe never did take root in Russia, partly for this reason. The anarchist movement in Russia was always feeble. It existed, but there were never very many anarchists. They flew a black flag, and in the end Trotsky exterminated them all, but as a movement they were small, they were inconsiderable, they were idealistic, and they were essentially non-Russian in inspiration. They looked to various Western thinkers quite consciously.

You could say that Tolstoy was anti-historical, and this would be just. The interesting thing about Tolstoy is not so much that he didn't believe that historians understood history – and he didn't. As you know, the most famous remark which Tolstoy made about history was that history always tells us things we don't want to know. He says history 'is like a deaf man answering questions which nobody puts to him'.<sup>28</sup> Historians give us answers to all kinds of trivial questions, whereas the great questions of human existence they carefully leave aside. But, apart from this, he was an eighteenth-century thinker who thought that all men were ultimately made of the same substance. There were certain great permanent moral and intellectual questions which could be answered by anyone if they simply ignored the sophistication by which they were surrounded, asked the questions in a simple and sincere fashion, and made a great effort to arrive at the truthful answers. The point about Tolstoy is not that his views were directed against the idea of a historical pattern: the point is that he

<sup>28</sup> *War and Peace*, epilogue, part 2, chapter 1: L. N. Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow/Leningrad, 1928–64) xii 300.

had to come to terms with it. No other great novelist needs to add to his novel, whether historical or otherwise, a huge excursus making quite plain what his attitude is towards history, sociology, metaphysics, determinism, freedom of the will and so on.

In 1890, to give you another example, the early Russian Marxist Peter Struve, who was at that period Lenin's friend and a great inspirer of Russian Marxism, was terribly worried about the problem of free will. Now, free will is of course a problem which has worried thinkers from the days of Epicurus onwards, perhaps, or preoccupied the thoughts of many philosophers and many common men. But in the case of Struve the problem arose: If history is determined, why need I sacrifice my life and take the risk of being shot, hanged or taken to Siberia? If everything is going to be inevitably all right anyway – if history is moving in my direction, perhaps it will take a little longer – why should heroic young men have to suffer the most terrible risks and face the most appalling dangers? And if the party is going to believe in determinism, perhaps their hands will falter and they will no longer be as energetic and as heroic as necessary. And so Struve says in all solemnity: Maybe the populists have something in what they say, because the populists are always arguing that everything is determined. Why be heroic, why take risks, why not just wait for history to take its course, if everything is going to produce a happy ending at some time or other? He says: Let us say that ninety per cent is determined, but ten is free.

This isn't the kind of discussion which used to go on between Sidney Webb and Graham Wallas. This isn't the kind of thing which M. Jules Guesde was talking about to Jaurès. This is not the way in which these people spoke. Why they didn't speak so is another question, but it was of crucial life-and-death importance to the Russian Social Democratic party whether the doctrine of determinism, or on the contrary the doctrine of limited free will, was true, and this had to be argued out night after night in heated discussions by these intellectuals, who were not merely intellectuals, but in the end responsible for the Russian Revolution: that is the point which I wish to impress upon you. And that is why

Tolstoy, who was anti-historical, had to make his bow before this, had to come to some understanding of history, had to explain that he was against it, had to make some kind of statement, come to terms with it and not simply ignore it. Flaubert didn't have to write about history, Dickens didn't have to write about history, Maupassant and Zola didn't have to write about history; nobody else did; but Tolstoy felt a certain inner necessity, and Dostoevsky did also.

The only other class of persons of whom it can be said firmly that they were not obsessed by history were the historians. On this note I should perhaps almost like to end. Those who were pursuing empirical research into history were least liable to be infected by the thought that there was some short cut, there was some huge pattern which one had to find before one could set to work. In the elder Solovev's work you still find certain Hegelian notes. The historian Chicherin is some kind of Hegelian too. But these are not the most eminent Russian historians. The great Klyuchevsky, historians like Platonov and Kareev and all the non-Marxist historians of the twentieth century, are exactly like their Western brothers, they simply write history as they find it, with whatever categories, whatever concepts appear to them to be the most useful in describing and accounting for events. They are the class of persons least affected by this metaphysical obsession. But politically and socially those upon whom the destinies of Russia turned out to rest, that is to say the socialists of the right and the socialists of the left, the socialist revolutionaries and the Kadets, all argued in terms of this framework to a degree, with an intensity, with a fanaticism, with a devotion which makes the arguments totally different, it seems to me, from any similar discussions in the West.

Something of the sort happened in Germany in the 1840s, 1850s, but nothing like this, nothing as profound as this. You don't find even in Ranke, you don't find even in Treitschke, you don't find even in the historical jurists, even in Savigny and persons of that sort, this kind of literal belief that, if only we can discover what the pattern is, then we shall be saved, and if we don't discover what

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the pattern is, then we shall be doomed. This seems to me to be a persistent note in Russian history from the beginning to the end, and this is the main reason why Marxism found such marvellously fertile soil in that country, and why these ideas, which were born in the West, became transformed out of all recognition once they came to Russia, and became the movement, and led to the consequences, which we all know.

*Initial transcription by Adrian Kreuzspiegel, edited by Henry Hardy*

# The Russian Obsession with History and Historicism

## *The second Dal Grauer<sup>29</sup> Memorial Lecture*

(Totem Park, University of British Columbia, Vancouver,  
Canada, 2 March 1971)<sup>30</sup>

ALLEN SINEL<sup>31</sup> [...] Berlin, who will give tonight's second Grauer Memorial Lecture. I should like to thank the Totem Residences for offering us this place to give the lecture, and stress how this lecture is indeed conceived for students in residence, and how happy we are to see all these students here. Sir Isaiah Berlin, formerly holder of one of the most distinguished chairs at Oxford, the Chichele Professorship of Political and Social Theory,<sup>32</sup> and now President of Wolfson College at Oxford, is truly one of the great intellectuals of our time. He has made outstanding contributions to philosophical thought, to the history of ideas, to the study of Russian literature and to Russian intellectual history, the field of tonight's lecture, entitled 'The Russian Obsession with History and Historicism'. Indeed, so wide-ranging are Sir Isaiah's interests that they defy classification by any narrow disciplinary approach. Philosopher, critic, historian, political thinker: he is all of these. But more than that, he has that rare gift of being able to share with those fortunate enough to hear, in the most inspiring yet witty way, his erudition and his wisdom. Those who attended his Monday afternoon lecture have already had vivid proof of this quality; to those who are hearing him tonight for the first time I need only say 'Listen.' Welcome, then, Sir Isaiah Berlin.

<sup>29</sup> A. E. 'Dal' Grauer (1906–61), President and Chairman, British Columbia Power Corporation and BC Electric Company, Chancellor and Chairman of the Board of Governors of the University of British Columbia. On his death his widow and friends endowed a memorial lectureship at UBC.

<sup>30</sup> Berlin had given a related lecture on the previous afternoon.

<sup>31</sup> Professor Allen Aaron Sinel (1934–2015), like Berlin a child of Russian Jewish émigrés, met Berlin in Oxford on a one-year fellowship. He joined UBC in 1964, and taught there for fifty years.

<sup>32</sup> sc. Social and Political Theory.

BERLIN Ladies and gentlemen, may I begin by thanking Professor Sinel for introducing me so generously. I can only say it probably does more credit to him than to me, and reveals more about his heart and his generosity than about my qualities, and for this I am most grateful to him. I return the compliment in double form.

I was going to speak tonight about Russian historicism and history. So far as straight history is concerned, I dare say as many Russians have been interested in history as anybody else, anywhere else, and in a perfectly normal fashion too. But the subject which I propose to talk about is the influence upon certain sections of them of interpretations of history which seem to me to have made a very great deal of difference to their national existence during the last one hundred and fifty years, and through that to all of us.

There are a great many motives for the study of history. Let me mention eight or nine at least. To begin with, people study history because of the solidarity which it conveys. We are all the sons of Cadmus; we are all Trojans. The first Frenchman was Francio, who came from Troy, the French were taught before the sixteenth century. The English were taught that they were all children of a Trojan called Brute. Anything which promotes national solidarity tends to excite us in history. It increases national cohesion: that's what the sociologists teach us. We are all the sons of Troy, we are all the sons of Abraham, we are all the sons of the same dragon – that is one motive. The second one is patriotism, glory, past achievements to inspire us to great future ones. The third is simply as material for the sciences, material for sociology, material for social psychology, simply natural philosophy teaching with material from deeds in history, in the way in which, say, Thucydides did it, or perhaps Hume and the sociologists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Or perhaps it's simply a school of morals: you pick out the bad and the good moments in history, like Voltaire, like Macaulay – you point out the moments which are progressive and splendid, and you point out the moments which are squalid and bloodstained in order to teach people to avoid them. This is

what is called ‘philosophy teaching by examples’.<sup>33</sup> Then there is the use of history simply for straight political purposes, in which you simply teach history as the struggle between rationalism and irrationalism, or clericalism and anticlericalism, or left and right. This a school of history very well known in our day. Or perhaps it’s a school which represents history as a great divine drama beginning with the creation of man and ending with the transfiguration and with the second coming, with all the great historical personages and periods following this great god-inspired and god-written dramatic succession of episodes in the way in which it is written about in the Bible, and in the way in which Augustine treated it, or various medieval philosophers, or Bossuet, or, in a secular form, thinkers like Schelling and Hegel and Marx. Or it’s a school of self-understanding, in which you understand human beings better and more profoundly through understanding what we came out of and why we are here and where we are going, in the way in which, say, Vico or Herder taught men, or to some extent Marx also: the self-transformation of man in the course of shaping his own history. Or it’s a sort of ballet or folk-dance conception, as in Herder, in which each human group has its own part to play, and dances on to the stage in response to certain historical cues, so that every dog has its day, every nation, every human group appears in due course and proceeds to realise itself in some fashion which contributes to the civilisation of the whole. This is the conception of the garden with many flowers, each of which blooms in a certain tempo at a certain point. Finally there is the motive of simple curiosity, just to find out what happened and why.

If you ask what it is that fixed itself upon the imagination of the

<sup>33</sup>[Henry St John, Viscount] Bolingbroke, *Letters on the Study and Use of History*, letter 2: *The Works of Lord Bolingbroke* (London, 1844) ii 177. Bolingbroke says that he thinks he read the remark in Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and he is right (see *Ars rhetorica* 11. 2), except that the *Ars rhetorica* is no longer attributed to Dionysius. Pseudo-Dionysius attributes his version – ‘History is philosophy from examples’ – to Thucydides, but it is in fact a creative paraphrase of what Thucydides says at 1. 22. 3.



Russians, it is the penultimate of these motives, namely the notion of each human group having its own part to play, appearing in time at a certain point and realising itself in its own unique peculiar fashion. And if you ask why this is so, it is because the Russians, as I tried to point out in my lecture yesterday, were latecomers to the great Western feast. They developed late as a world power, only in the early nineteenth century. They felt that they were looked upon, as I say, as powerful but barbarous, like all nations that are economically or socially backward. They had a feeling that they must demonstrate their powers, they must have some part to play, they must show that they do have a role to execute in the great unrolling of the human carpet, and any philosophy which taught that every powerful human group surely has a moment at which *it* occupies the stage, at which *it* teaches the rest of humanity, at which *its* message becomes a compelling message for all mankind – any such doctrine is likely to commend itself to a vigorous, ambitious group of human beings who had hitherto not played any significant role, and were both conscious of youth and strength and ambition, and at the same time felt themselves to be uneducated, ignorant, barbarous, and feared and despised by the more developed nations of the West. This happened to the Germans in the eighteenth century, and to the Russians, in due course, in the nineteenth, and to a good many people in the twentieth century, all around the globe, who are not very difficult to think of.

The fundamental motive, therefore, which dominated these Russians, particularly in the 1820s and 1830s, was a search for a libretto. Herzen put it very vividly when he asked the question: Has history a libretto? And if history has a libretto, like an opera, what part in it has been assigned to us? I won't go over again what I said to you yesterday about Chaadaev, who condemned his own people for having no past, and wondered if they really did have some role to play in history, and wondered why they'd been created. After Chaadaev had been condemned for lunacy, in daring to say that the Russians had no significant history, and perhaps have no very significant part to play, he duly repented, as others have done since his day, and in his later work he no longer insisted upon the gloomy

and meaningless past of Russia, but, on the contrary, in a famous essay called ‘Apology of a Madman’ – ‘Apologie d’un fou’ – he says: It may be that coming late to the feast of the nations carries its own advantages. After all, Europe is probably at the end of its tether. ‘We are beginning: they are finishing’<sup>34</sup> is the well-known cry of developing nations. Maybe a special role has been reserved for us. Maybe there is a special advantage in being backward, because they will have invented all the weapons of modern civilisation, they have gone through terrible industrial hell for the purpose of creating the advanced weapons of civilisation, the machinery, the technology which is being developed now. We are able to profit by this without going through the agonies through which they have gone. We can profit by their labours without paying the price.

This notion that lateness carries its own reward, that if you come late you can profit by the gifts or by the inventions of others without necessarily having to earn them by the kind of labour which the others have had to expend, is something which Chaadaev is the first to enunciate. It is then repeated by Herzen; it is repeated by Chernyshevsky, who was an early Russian socialist thinker, in the 1860s and the 1870s. It was finally repeated by the late Isaac Deutscher, when he explains why it is that nations in Asia and Africa perhaps have a better chance of succeeding than the exhausted nations of the West. This is a well-known object of hope. It’s a well-known prop for people who feel that their resources have been somewhat inadequate in the past, and therefore that there may be something to be said for starting with an absolutely blank sheet. This is a doctrine which is frequently repeated in Russia in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The other motive is that with the decay of the authority of the Church, and with the general decay of religion in the early nineteenth century, they needed some substitute, some faith, some goal to which to fix themselves. And it appeared to them that the historical doctrines which they derived from the Germans,

<sup>34</sup> See 117 below.

principally from Herder and from Hegel, in which history *is* a drama with many acts and scenes, in which therefore there is an order in terms of which various nations can appear on the stage through trapdoors in order to play their part – if this could be believed, it offered them the firmest hope of doing something significant, of acquiring the kind of proud national self-identity which they were in need of, for which they felt a necessity.

This kind of ersatz religion can be felt particularly strongly in the writings of Russian critics in the 1830s and 1840s. As I tried to say yesterday, if you take the critic Belinsky, he really tried to live the doctrines of Hegel. Once he decided that Hegel was right, and that everything which happened in history had its explanation, and therefore that everything which happened in history could be justified by being a historical necessity, coming when it does, he really tried to live this doctrine, even though it committed him to various disagreeable consequences. Nobody has ever tried to live doctrines with the intensity and with the earnestness and with the depth of the Russians. There have been lots of philosophies of history since Hegel. After all, there are the philosophies of Spengler and of Toynbee. You may believe in Toynbee's doctrines or you may not. But nobody has ever tried to live Toynbee. The Russians are the only people who really have tried to live through what they genuinely believed in, in this sense. The Russian intellectuals of the 1830s and 1840s attempted in their very lives to behave like people upon whom it was incumbent to realise certain values which only the 1830s and 1840s could bring to fruition. They asked themselves what history was like. They decided that the Germans were right, that if there was to be a science of history – and they believed in science: science was the only great liberating force of the modern world, which would for ever kill superstition, which would for ever kill ignorance and prejudice and all the horrors of the past – if there *is* a science, there must be a pattern, there must be a pattern which can be understood. If there is a pattern, the question to ask is: Where do we occur in this pattern? Where are we? Where do we come in? Which stage have we reached? And this is what preoccupies a good many Russian thinkers in the middle 1850s.

The entire argument between the Slavophiles and the Westerners, which is a well-known argument erupting in Russia in the nineteenth century, takes a deeply historical form. On the one hand there are the Slavophiles, who say: We have our own unique past, we needn't follow the West. Someone like the thinker Khomyakov says: Look at what has occurred in the West. There are two tendencies there. On the one hand, the Roman Church that has become decayed, which has simply produced a feeble bureaucracy and an enfeebled authoritarian order without any spirit, without any soul, which at present oppresses the decadent peoples of France and Italy; on the other hand, the revolt against it in the direction of Protestantism, which is simply an atomising force which has split people up into mere individuals and has robbed them of all creative urge, which has destroyed their sense of community, and which has made of each man a watertight little island unable to communicate with others, totally self-centered and self-concentrated. We, fortunately, through the Schism, because we have not participated in these heresies of the West, have preserved the freshness, the creativity, the nearness to Christ, the nearness to God, a spiritual liberty and a natural sense of community which we alone of all the human tribes have possessed, and this we must carefully cultivate. On no account must we imitate these decayed and unworthy representatives of the Christian religion. Hence tremendous stress on our Russian past and tremendous condemnation of Peter the Great, who had the temerity to make the ghastly blunder of trying to imitate the West and so kill the natural spontaneity of the Slav spirit, the one thing which we can be proud of, the unruined, unspoiled, unbent, free Russian spirit which beats in the breasts of our uncorrupted peasants. It may no longer beat in the breasts of our semi-corrupted bourgeoisie. It is dead in the breasts of our wholly corrupted bureaucracy. But if you go to the villages, you will still find there the great, the broad Russian nature, the uncorrupted, smiling Russian faces which are symptoms of a far freer and far nobler development than the busy, neurotic, oppressed caricature figures running about the streets of Paris and of London now

show. This is the Slavophiles. I have slightly caricatured their doctrine, but the essence of it is, I think, more or less as I have stated it.

In answer to this there are the Westerners – Granovsky, Belinsky, Chernyshevsky – various persons who say: Not at all. If science is science and the same pattern must be followed by all men qua men, what the West has done we shall have to do too. The very notion of a separate state being reserved for us, of something special being reserved for us, the idea that we alone have been excepted by God from the terrible fate of other nations – the others have gone to their doom through following false paths, but we alone have been preserved to be the saviours of mankind, which Dostoevsky afterwards said – this is surely unscientific, whatever else it may be. If men are what they are, if there is a human nature which can be examined scientifically, if there are laws which can be discovered about how human societies evolve in relation to their environment, in relation to the surrounding nature, and in relation to the organs with which they are endowed – if there is such a thing, then it is perfectly clear that there cannot be any exceptions. If a thing is a cow, it is going to have a cow-like fate. If the creature is human, it must have a human fate. If one is a nation, one must have the fate of nations. All nations must go through the same hoop – with minor variations, perhaps, but in general through the same kind of process. Therefore, we are simply backward. Peter the Great was perfectly right. What he did was to drive us in a rather brutal manner, and a rather precipitate manner, but still drive us, on to the main road of human civilisation. And thank God we are there. We've paid a very heavy price for it. But if we hadn't done that, we should have been where the Eskimos are now. And therefore we must go forward. All this talk about the Russian commune, all this talk about Russian freedom, all this talk about the broad Russian soul has not saved other nations from doom. The Arabs too have had a communal existence. They've also had a *mir*, they've also had an *obshchina*, as it is called – some kind of communal existence, of which the Slavs are also proud – and yet they've made nothing of it. There is absolutely no point in

inviting us to go through the fate of the Arabs of the Arabian Desert.

And so there is a well-known argument about whether Peter the Great was a noble saviour or an obsessed lunatic – and criminal, indeed. And this continues through the 1830s, the 1840s and the 1850s. The ground of it is entirely historical. Both parties appeal not so much to history as to patterns in history, to a pattern of how human beings develop. Each grounds his claim entirely on historical argument, and each advocates the adoption of this or that course on the ground that this is now historically desirable, the Slavophiles because we are fulfilling our Slav nature, and this is the way to do it, the Westerners because this is the path to justice, civilisation, light, and to everything which the English and the French have already done, and we still have to do.

This obsession with ‘Where are we on the ladder of civilisation? Have we reached stage seventeen, or are we still at stage nine? Which step are we on, in order to calculate what step is appropriate?’ – this is not thinkable in the West: the notion that everything must be adjusted to a position in the abstract schema in which you believe as much as people believed in the word of God at an earlier stage. In fact, history now replaces the divine word; history replaces faith in religion; history becomes that great external authority in terms of which you justify or condemn acts. Persons in the West didn’t go about saying: What is to be the fate of England? What is to be the fate of France? *Sud’ba rossii*,<sup>35</sup> the destinies of Russia, becomes an obsessive subject to the novelists and the historians, to the social thinkers, to everybody who is concerned with Russia. What is to be our fate? Where are we going? Are we going to be destroyed by the Western nations? Are we for ever going to lag behind them, or on the contrary are we going to overtake them? Are we going to be as good as them? Or even better? Have we a special duty towards them? Have they a duty towards us? Are we the messianic nation that is going to save them, or on the contrary are we the home of darkness and

<sup>35</sup> ‘The fate of Russia’.

barbarism, never to be saved from the dreadful yoke of this ghastly government? And so on.

When Western thinkers ask themselves questions, they do not ask themselves questions in this form. When Michelet, let us say, a French historian just as much obsessed by the thought of history – when he denounces the Jesuits, or when he denounces Napoleon III as a tyrant, or whatever he may do, he doesn't say to himself: Have the Jesuits betrayed French destiny? Is Napoleon III a traitor to the laws of history? This wouldn't mean anything. When John Stuart Mill wants to know whether this or that course of action is the proper course of action for the English nation in 1860, or whenever it may be, he doesn't ask himself: What is the historical obligation of a nation like the English in 1862? On which rung of the ladder of civilisation are we at the moment, and what does this rung demand of us? This notion that history makes demands upon you, that you must behave in accordance with what the historical moment exacts from you, that there is an inexorable pattern in which you are to find yourself, and having found yourself on the map, this itself conveys or entails a certain direction in our behaviour – this is typical of people who cannot as yet trust themselves, trust their own common sense as John Stuart Mill could, can't trust their political convictions as Michelet could, and have to have recourse to some outside authority: in the old days, the word of God, in the new days, the new goal of history, which is a kind of *vade mecum*, which gives you the answers to all the deepest questions of national and individual existence.

You will find that this thing goes right on. Let me give you an example of the sort of thing I mean. The historian Chicherin, in the middle of the nineteenth century, argues that a Russian constitution cannot be obtained, a liberalisation of the tsarist regime isn't on, because we are still at such and such a stage of the Hegelian evolution. Since we are only at a rather early stage, we may have to wait centuries for all the trials, for all the thesis and antithesis and synthesis to be gone through and the synthesis to produce its own antithesis, and this to produce its own synthesis. All this has to be gone through patiently; the corridor must be gone

through stage by stage; you can't skip stages; history is an absolutely inexorable pattern, and the idea of trying to skip stages is mere childishness. Herzen, writing to Bakunin in the late 1860s – Bakunin wants to make a revolution at once – says: You don't understand; revolutions cannot be made now; liberated slaves cannot construct buildings which are capable of giving freedom; out of the bricks of slavery, out of the bricks of a prison, no free man's dwelling can be constructed.<sup>36</sup> We have been through centuries of the knout, injustice, arbitrariness, monstrosity. Patience, patience: history has its his own tempo. Gradually we must educate our people towards these rewards, and in a certain rhythm of history to which you must adjust yourself. If you don't adjust yourself to this rhythm, if you do make a revolution, if you do have a putsch, you will find that history will avenge herself; that in fact, instead of creating a free community, you will merely create a new slave community to replace the old one. You will exchange one yoke for another. History cannot be mocked.

This semi-personification of history as an external force which governs you, and which you must study very carefully in order to be able to adjust yourself to its movements, is something, I won't say unique about the Russians, because the Germans show traces of it too, but which the Russians exhibit in a far more vivid degree than any other people. Take the great argument between the populists in the 1870s about what we ought to do. I shall give you an example of what I mean. The neo-Jacobin Tkachev thought that the only way to liberate the Russian people was by means of a putsch: We can't work with the peasants. We can't listen to what the peasants say. The peasants are the enormous mass of Russia, but they are stupid, reactionary and feckless. We can liberate them, but we can't expect them to liberate themselves. We can do something *for* them, but we can't do anything *with* them. If we trust the peasants, they will simply hand us over to the police, which in fact is what did happen to all those young men who in the early years of the 1870s did go into the country and did try to help the

<sup>36</sup> See 29 above.



peasants, but they obviously had such genteel actions which were clearly so unlike the peasants, in spite of their clothes, that the peasants were naturally suspicious, and handed them over to the authorities in droves. And therefore the only way of promoting a proper revolution is by having a small, well-organised conspiracy of full-time professional revolutionaries who will seize power and hold it, if need be against the peasants, in order to liberate these very peasants, if need be against their will.

To this the more moderate populist Lavrov said: But if you do that, you'll be behaving like the Jacobins in France. The appeal is always to history. Look at what happened there. They seized power, then, in order to protect themselves against counter-revolutionaries, they more or less had to militarise themselves. The very act of having to hold on to power in order to prevent people overthrowing you brutalises and militarises you, and makes you ultimately suppress the people whom you are trying to liberate, in the very act of trying to resist the counter-revolution. Anything which makes you into a besieged army tends to brutalise you, tends to make you into an oppressor. And once you have become an oppressor, the question of survival becomes important, the question of the self-perpetuation of your power, and you will never liberate them at all.

To which Tkachev said: Yes, it's all very well your saying that, but let's look at other examples in history. If you wait, that will happen to you which happened in the last two centuries in France, and in England, and in Germany. Where do we get our revolutionaries from? We get them from the educated classes. We get them from among the doctors. We get them from among the engineers. We get them from among the agrarian experts. We get them from among the lawyers, whose lives are of course made miserable by the oppressive and idiotic regime of tsarist Russia. But if they are intelligent, they will do something. They will provide the scientists with laboratories. They will give doctors employment. They will employ the engineers in state enterprises. They will use agricultural experts to improve the peasants, and they will buy them off. All they need is simply the opportunity for work, for

creative work. Once they do that they will cease to be revolutionary, the fire will go out of them. And then you won't be able to make the revolution at all.

He needn't have worried. The Russian government, in fact, did not display such intelligence. But the analogies were with what happened in France towards the end of the eighteenth century and at the beginning of the nineteenth. By giving opportunities to these very men, they managed to disarm potential revolutionaries. Therefore the appeal in both cases is entirely to historical examples. There isn't very much appeal to direct moral principles, or direct political principles, as there would have been in the case of similar disputes in France, or in England, or in America, or even in Germany. Similarly, almost every argument in the 1860s and 1870s takes this form: Where are we? What point of the path have we reached? Which rung of the ladder? Which step of the advance have we made?

That is why I wish to convey to you that when Marxism finally came to Russia in a serious way, which happened towards the end of the 1870s and at the beginning of the 1880s, its seed fell on immensely fertile soil. Already the soil was prepared for historicism, in this sense, already the Russians were prepared to believe that what the great authorities of the West said was true. Another characteristic of these Russians is immense bowing before foreign authorities. Having none of your own, you always quote texts. If you want to prove a point, you don't prove it so much from empirical observation. Sometimes, of course, you use historical examples, but there was not very much independent sociological thought. What happens is you say: Buckle says; Mill says; Spencer says; Darwin says. And these things have enormous authority, not because these men are so important, but because they are in the confidence of history. They are scientists. History is a science. These men have the secret. They have the key, they have the pattern. And if they say that, surely, surely. This is what Western scientists believe, and who are we poor fools to resist the onward march of this great science, which covers history as well? So when Marxism came, it fell on very fertile soil, and the seeds

sprouted. The socialist revolutionaries who were not Marxists were genuinely terrified by what Marxism taught, because what Marxism taught them was some form of determinism, that there is a pattern in history which cannot be avoided. I do not wish to be a toe on the leg of history, said Mikhailovsky.<sup>37</sup> I do not wish to believe myself to be dominated by some huge force over which I have no control.

Freedom of the will, determinism, is a famous human problem which people have worried about from the days of the Stoics, at least, until the present day. And people have accepted that it is no doubt an agonising problem both for philosophers and sometimes for ordinary men. But the Russians are the only people for whom the problem of free will actually made a difference to political propaganda. When Mikhailovsky uttered these things, and other socialist revolutionaries objected that if there was a grim determinism prevailing in the world, then perhaps there was no point in running [...] – if history is in fact, according to Marx, going to do the job for us. First you have the feudal regime; then you have early industrialism; then you have developed industrialism; then you have the industrialists training an army of workers against their own purposes, but they train them to become their own gravediggers. Then you have the revolution made by the workers, which inevitably ends in the victory of the proletariat and the emergence of the classless society. If this is inevitable, why should we today take risks, risk imprisonment and death, when by simply waiting – it might take a little longer, but there's absolutely no point in taking unnecessary risks, if history, if the stars in their courses are going to do the job for us.

In order to stop the Party from falling into this rather gloomy condition, the thinker Peter Struve, writing in the 1890s, has actually to persuade his party that although ninety per cent of history is determined, ten per cent is not. You don't get Kautsky or Bernstein in Germany, you don't get Jaurès in France, you don't get William Morris or somebody in England, all of whom are

<sup>37</sup> See 28 above.

socialists touched by Marxism, having to persuade their followers that although as to ninety per cent they can't help themselves, because they are the playthings and pawns of some great impersonal process, yet there is a corner of ten per cent where perhaps a certain amount of freedom will prevail, and therefore the game isn't completely up. It's all right: there is some room for individual enterprise and initiative. But in Russia Struve, who is a perfectly serious thinker, has to work out a doctrine in accordance with which, although ninety per cent is foreclosed – you can't do anything about that – ten per cent is free, so it's worth doing certain things after all. It's worth organising, it's worth taking risks, it's worth having strikes, it's worth pressing the government, it's worth having conspiracies, and the rest of it.

This is a very unique situation. Let me give you another example. The socialist revolutionaries emerging from the study of the agrarian question realise, of course, at a certain point that if Marx was right, and if the condition for a successful revolution was having an enormous industrial proletariat which was in fact the majority of the nation, then the Russians, the majority of whose population, ninety-two per cent of whose population were simply agricultural workers or peasants, hadn't any chance of having a revolution in their lifetime. They'd have to wait for a very long time. And the Marxist Plekhanov, the teacher of Lenin, did indeed say: It's no good. We've got to get through it, got to go through the corridor. We must now help the capitalists to create the capitalist regime. They will breed the proletariat, and the proletariat will overthrow them. We are still at a rather early stage of this process. You can't jump these stages. We've now got to help the capitalists to create the very order which is going to oppress us into liberation.

This was a very disagreeable topic for people who thought that no condition was worse than having an oppressed proletariat – the ghastly conditions of the Industrial Revolution with all its horrors. Nevertheless, if history is a science, all these stages must occur, and so on. So the socialist revolutionaries wrote – one of them, at least,

or two of them, in fact – wrote a letter to Karl Marx<sup>38</sup> and said: Do we have to go through this stage? Is there not some method of attaining socialism through the peasant commune by circumnavigating? Must we really go through the horrors of industrialisation, of the creation of a proletariat, of exploitation, of surplus value, of the entire bag of tricks? Well, at first Marx naturally wasn't very pleased by this. He was astonished, and said: Are you asking me to exempt you from the laws of history, like a headmaster? Could they have a special arrangement made with history? This was really too naive. On the other hand, although he despised and disliked Slavs for the greater part of his life, in the 1870s, when there was a period of extreme reaction in Europe – it happened after the crushing of the French commune, when the chances of any left-wing movement in Europe were very dim – the only people who appeared to him to display any initiative were the Russians. There at least some governors were shot. There were some bombs which did go off. The revolutionaries did show a certain amount of individual courage and stamina.

Three or four of them who managed to get out came to pay homage to Marx, and to recognise him as the greatest revolutionary theorist in the world. It would need an even stronger nature than Marx's not to yield to the profound and sincere veneration which these brave and heroic men evidently felt for the old man in London. And so he did relent somewhat. And he wrote them a letter in which he said: Well, when I was writing *Das Kapital*, when I was evolving my theory of historical materialism, I wasn't thinking about Eastern Europe at all. I was really thinking about the West (which was true enough). In your conditions – well (he said), in certain conditions you might be able to do it: if, for example, there is a world revolution to sustain you on its shoulders, because if there isn't a world revolution the other capitalist

<sup>38</sup> See 31 above. IB's reference to 'two of them' may reflect the fact that Nikolay Morozov had visited Marx in December 1880 on behalf of the Executive Committee of Narodnaya volya and asked him to write a text on the Russian village commune. IB may have mistaken a visit for a letter.

countries will extinguish your revolution, however successful you may be in starting it. If there *is* a world revolution, it's just possible that you may be able to go straight into socialism without entering the long and painful stage of factory industrialisation. This is very uncertain, but there is a chance.

Now, you must understand the position of the Marxist party. The Marxists really believe in the literal inspiration of Marx's texts. They believe terribly in the authority of the great scientists of the West, as great, naive people are liable to do. When Plekhanov, who was a faithful Marxist, self-converted in about 1883 or so – perhaps a little later – discovered that this letter had been written, he realised that the publication of it would cause absolute havoc in the Russian Marxist party. If Marx gave them the faintest hope of being able to circumvent the necessity of industrialisation and of breeding a proletariat, not only would the socialist revolutionaries have turned out to be right as against faithful Marxists, but the Marxists themselves might become demoralised. And so he suppressed the letter, the letter published for the first time in 1924, well after everybody is dead, well after the Revolution. And I think this was right from his point of view.

The point I wish to make is this. It wouldn't have been necessary to suppress the letter by Marx in any other country. If Marx had written a letter of a somewhat heretical, non-Marxist type to Kautsky in Germany, or to Bernstein; if he had written in these terms to Jules Guesde, who was the leader of the Marxist socialists in France; it might have stimulated a certain amount of lively discussion in the socialist organs. People would have said: He means this, or he means that. We ought to interpret his text in this way or in that way. We must learn from history. Marxism is not dogma. It has to be applied in a creative and spontaneous fashion to the changing circumstances of the time. Some people would have said: Well, perhaps the old man was nodding when he wrote this; perhaps he wrote it rather late in life; perhaps his earlier writings are more important. At any rate I don't think there would have been anything more than simple lively debate. But in Russia it would have created a disaster in the Party. Plekhanov was

absolutely right from his point of view in suppressing this document, which afterwards caused fearful indignation among the people who still remembered him when they discovered what he had done. But from the point of view of preserving the cohesion and the faith of the Russian movement, these kinds of heresies had to be kept dark, even when they proceeded from the author of the orthodoxy himself. Consequently, as I say, the letter was suppressed.

I'm giving you this only as an illustration of the passionate faith of the total idealists in the notion of the inevitable historical pattern upon which the whole of late Russian Marxism was securely founded. And Marxism was an attractive doctrine because at the time when the police had finally caught up with individual revolutionary terrorism – which had in fact succeeded in assassinating the Emperor Alexander II – when they finally disbanded the terrorist movement, Marxism was a relief, because it at once said that individual terrorism was no use, and when people said 'What then should we do?', the answer was you would go to the British Museum or its equivalent, study history, and after you had discovered the proper theory of history, then gradually build up a party and the propaganda and go through all the historical stages patiently, one by one. This was a very great relief to people who didn't want either to risk their lives or go to jail, above all because it offered a happy ending to the story. Success in the end was guaranteed. There is nothing that inspires people so much as the conviction that the stars in their courses are fighting for them. And this Marxism genuinely guaranteed more than any other movement of its time.

If you ask about Lenin, for example – I don't wish to multiply examples – he was absolutely steeped in historical mythology. In 1896 or thereabouts – I don't guarantee the date – being impatient by nature, and being rather gloomy at the thought that a long period of industrialisation was needed before the revolution could possibly be a success in a peasant country, which is what the Western Marxists were maintaining; being, as I say, somewhat discouraged by this, he tried to work up a theory whereby, after all,

peasants were peasant proprietors; proprietors were capitalists; if what you needed was a capitalist regime in a high period of development, maybe Russian agriculture, in a rather eccentric fashion, could be regarded as a high capitalist regime in an advanced stage of development. Therefore, perhaps the chances of an early revolution were not all that dim. Well, he was ultimately persuaded out of it, naturally enough, but the mere attempt to adapt the Marxist doctrine to rather recalcitrant Russian conditions showed this absolute desire to try to fit into the proper slot in history. Otherwise there was no hope.

Similarly, in the revolution of 1905 the question arose: Where are we on the historical scale? Are we in 1848 or are we later? What sort of revolution should we make? Should we read Marx's writings of 1850, which tell us that the proper way for a proletarian party to proceed is to make a revolution together with the liberals, and then gradually sabotage the liberals, and take over power, which is Marx's advice of about 1850? Or, on the contrary, do we read the Marx of the 1860s, who says that the only thing to do is to start a slow educational process – propaganda, the creation of a cadre of conscious workers who will gradually lead the proletariat, which by this time will have become the physical majority of the country? Depending on the answer about which Marx to read, the appropriate political tactics will follow. They would follow and be valid only if they can be attached to and read off from the book, which itself is a key to the actual structure of the history and development and pattern of modern society.

In other words, the fixation upon historicism in this sense is very, very great. And history becomes, as I say, what God was to Calvinists versus Catholics or Catholics versus Calvinists; what the will of God was to Muslims versus Christians or Christians versus Muslims. Even in 1947, Stalin was still able to kill quite a lot of people for the crime of ignoring the true historical laws of economic development. I don't want to say that every Russian was affected by this; I wish to say only that the particular clans, the group of persons who in fact affected Russian history, namely the intellectuals, who gave its tone to the intelligentsia, gave its tone to



radical rational thought, and ultimately produced the only party which, in 1917, appeared organised enough and able enough to seize power and to use it to effective account – that these people were intoxicated with the notion of a historical pattern. And this is what gave them their strength, their hope, and militated in favour of their success: there is nothing that succeeds so well as a coherent doctrine, whether or not the facts fit. If the facts don't fit, you simply bend them to fit the doctrine: that also is a way of succeeding.

I don't know if all Russians were affected by this. It has to be admitted, for example, that the socialist revolutionaries never were. A revolutionary like Bakunin, too, who thought that any time and any place was suitable for making a revolution, was not much affected by historical theories. The idea of historical determinism struck him as a hideous cage which would prevent people like him from acting in the wild, free, spontaneous and destructive manner which is what he loved above all. There were other thinkers, too; there were some among the populists in the 1870s, like Mikhailovsky and Pisarev, who didn't accept it. Tolstoy didn't accept this theory, among the great writers, but then he didn't accept it because he didn't believe in history at all; because he thought that anyone who pretended to find out about the patterns of history was simply a charlatan, because there *were* no laws knowable to man, and anybody who pretended to know any, like sociologists or scientists, were simply telling lies. I have read the whole of *Das Kapital*, said Tolstoy. I have read it so accurately that I could be examined on it. Let me tell you, there's nothing in it.

The other group of persons who were not affected by this prevailing historicism, let me tell you, and this is interesting enough, were none other than the historians. I don't say they were all unaffected, and you could say that perhaps Granovsky and Solovev the elder – the father of the philosopher – did make a formal bow to historicism. In their introductions they do affect to say that history has a certain structure. Solovev produces such a Hegelian statement. And Granovsky says that history has a pattern, but we mustn't assume it to be rigid, because nothing is more awful

than a man who comfortably lies down on a bed of dogma, and then proceeds not to think at all about how things really happened, and in fact there is a great deal more spontaneity in history than is allowed for by even the most eminent theorists; but, having said these things, he proceeds to write history in a perfectly normal manner. So does the greatest of all Russian historians, Klyuchevsky. So does Platonov. So does Kareev. So do all the most eminent historians at the turn of the century, and the Russians have had their share of profound eminent historians no less than any other nation. People who actually do history find that the way to write it is by sheer empirical research, by discovering what happened, when it happened, and trying to answer why it happened in terms of ordinary non-theoretical categories. So that the myth appealed, not to historians, but to people in search of an ersatz religion, or people who wanted a role, people who wanted there to be a guaranteed happy ending, people who wanted something which would equip them for life.

In modern days, this doctrine spread beyond the confines of Russia. The whole conception, for example, of the imperatives of industrialisation, of moments of take-off, of special historical launching-pads from which you can set off, of having to find out the exact moment at which you set off – that there are certain stages, and one must go through these stages, which you must not skip – the whole notion of following through a set pattern which is created for you by nature, by history herself, has become quite an embedded view in the thinking of quite a lot of backward nations seeking to acquire power and identity through industrialising themselves on what they conceive to be the pattern of the Russian Revolution, and in this way has had an enormous influence in Asia and in Africa.

You'll find odd examples of it outside Asia and Africa too. For example, if you think of Nazi Germany in the later stages of the war which they lost. In 1945, when the Germans were losing the war very obviously, and when Mr Roosevelt died, and there was some hope in Germany that this would turn the war in their favour, because America might give up on the war, or something dramatic

might happen to save them, and this didn't happen, Dr Goebbels said: It is inconceivable that the whole of history should lead to this. Surely after the rise of the Nazi party, all these miracles which happened in Germany cannot be wholly meaningless? And he said: History must indeed be a whore if she allows us to perish. Now this implies that there is some kind of godless history, that there is a historical pattern which you can understand, and if only you rely upon that you will be favoured. That history will simply turn out to be a whore, history will turn out to be meaningless, is an inconceivable thought. Mussolini, when the Allies first landed in Sicily, and Italy was in danger, said: We are fighting, but history has us by the throat.<sup>39</sup> Men one can resist, history scarcely.

And so you get this notion of a huge, impersonal force called 'history', which has its own pattern. If only you can find out where you belong there, and hitch yourself on to the correct bit of it, then you may be sure that you'll be carried on to the next stage by forces which nothing can resist. If you make a mistake and get yourself to the wrong place you will be crushed by the juggernaut. But that notion of history stems from this very pathetic although intelligible desire of the Russians, particularly in the nineteenth century, to acquire some doctrine in terms of which they would come out top, in terms of which all their apparent disadvantages would turn into advantages, in terms of which their backwardness and their barbarism would be transmuted by some magical process into something which would make them victors over the very people who they thought, at any rate, despised them and mocked them and looked down upon them. This is really the doctrine.

I don't want at this stage to utter any general propositions about the validity or invalidity of historicism as a doctrine, or as a doctrine of the patterns of history. I have to come to a conclusion. I ought perhaps to hint to you that it seems to me that the twentieth century has done very little to prop up the view that history moves

<sup>39</sup> The Allies invaded Sicily in July–August 1943, but Mussolini's '**La storia vi prende alla gola**' ('History takes you by the throat') occurs in a speech of 23 February 1941.

in inexorable stages. I think it was the late Mr Justice Brandeis of America, I can't remember where, who once said that the irresistible is very often merely that which people don't sufficiently try to resist. And I think there is a certain truth in that.

This is all I have to say on this topic. There's just one thing I'd like to add. If anyone wants to ask me questions I shall be extremely happy to reply to them. But as there are a good many people in this room who have honoured me by their presence, maybe it would be a good thing if there was perhaps, with your permission, an interval now of, say, three or four minutes in which those who wish to go away can go away, and those who wish to ask me questions or discuss things with me could be left behind and perhaps come forward, and ask me anything they wish. Thank you very much.

## DISCUSSION

SINEL [...] see my introduction was not generous, but truthful. I'd like to thank Sir Isaiah on behalf of all of you for another very, very brilliant talk. Thank you. Be the questions asked.

BERLIN [...].

QUESTIONER [...].

BERLIN I'm sorry, you're asking me whether there is something peculiar about the Russians which makes them [...].

QUESTIONER Which makes them [...].

BERLIN I see. Yes. No, I don't think so. There may be something peculiar, but I don't know that – it's always rather a feeble thing to say to – national character is the very last kind of reasoning which one ought to use in explaining anything, because it's on the whole circular. You are simply saying, 'Russians are the kind of people

who do this kind of thing, and that's why they do them?'; which is not a very illuminating sort of answer. No. I tried to convey, perhaps not very successfully, I'm afraid, that this is a situation which is fairly frequent in the case of all – not all, but anyhow many – undeveloped nations, when they are faced with a combination of circumstances, namely a feeling of their own strength – they have come to maturity – being precipitated on to the world stage after some period of isolation, suddenly finding themselves involved in world events; and at the same time an acute feeling of, not an inferiority complex, but actual inferiority in the matter of education, of civilisation, of technology. And when you are in that condition I think you have to whistle to keep your courage up and you feel that since the past isn't there to buoy you up sufficiently, the future will be, something must be, and any doctrine which promises that is going to be very well received. And I don't think that's confined to the Russians at all, I think you will find exactly the same thing is true of various nations in Africa and Asia, who feel that whatever may have happened in the past they have glorious futures, that the white races are on the retreat, and there is little to be done; for many years they have lingered in darkness, but there are 800 millions of them, soon there will be a billion, or there are 400 millions of them, soon there will be half a billion, or something else of that kind, that they are unexhausted, that the old imperialists are plainly rather exhausted, and therefore we shall come on to the stage.

The Germans felt it quite acutely in 1770. The Russians began feeling it, I suppose, somewhere around 1820. And other nations, I think, have subsequently felt exactly the same. I'm sure that's the [...] – if you go to certain parts of Africa and Asia, I've no doubt that they feel that numbers and strength and the future is on their side. It's the old saying: the Russian traveller Fonvizin, who visited Paris in 1777–8, who said: 'Nous commençons et ils finissent' –

‘We are beginning: they are finishing.’<sup>40</sup> So that I don’t think it is peculiar to the Russians, that’s what I want to say. It’s a kind of historicism on my part to say that nations in such a condition tend to develop those kinds of consequences. But of that I am not altogether ashamed.

QUESTION [...].

BERLIN [...] Nothing inspires people so much – it’s illogical, but nothing inspires people so much as the thought that the stars in their courses are fighting for you. Although you could leave it to the stars, you don’t. You feel that if you go in a certain direction and historic forces are washing you up, if they are buoying you up and moving in the same direction, you will surely win. This is what buoyed up the Calvinists, who were equally deterministic in the wars of the sixteenth century. But in this case, of course, the [...] a revolution can be part of a determinist pattern. If you read Karl Marx – that’s presumably what we are thinking of – if you read the works of Marx you will find that in some sense the revolution cannot be averted. Whether it will be bloody or not will depend perhaps upon the circumstances in which in each country it will arise. But that there *will* be a revolution, i.e. liquidation of one class by another in some forcible way, that he regards as an absolute historical necessity. The fact that it is necessary doesn’t make it less desirable to fight for on the part of those who are going to profit by it. The only thing is, of course, that they may think that even if they do nothing at all, it will come anyway. Therefore why make the effort? Well, the doctrine says: If that’s true, it will happen. But if you accelerate it, you will shorten the birth pangs: at least you’ll have it in your own day. People were not very satisfied to think that the revolution may take another five hundred years to mature.

<sup>40</sup> Letter of 5 February 1778 (OS) to Yakov Bulgakov: Denis Ivanovich Fon-Vizin, *Sochineniya, pis'ma i izbrannyye perevody*, ed. P. A. Efremov (St Petersburg, 1866), 273.

If you think that your own efforts may actually make it happen tomorrow, that no doubt is a very strong form of leverage.

QUESTION [...].

BERLIN It did. Yes. [...] a perfectly good question. In the case of the Chinese, I think, we do know the answer, you see. When Mao began to modify Marxism by saying that it's possible to make a revolution as a result of the organisation of peasants, instead of waiting for the proletariat to develop, this was severely denied, as you know, by the Communists in Moscow; and in fact, when they successfully made this kind of revolution, they rather reluctantly had to swallow its results, and for a time, anyhow, pretend that this was all right: it was perfectly coherent and perfectly compatible and harmonious with orthodox Marxist doctrine, but of course it wasn't. There is very little in the works of Marx about peasants: everything about peasants has to be imported afterwards. Lenin did a certain amount of trying to work out Marxist doctrine in the villages, by which you define the poor peasants as being some kind of proletariat. But the idea that an agrarian country like China could make a revolution without the aid of the industrial workers at all – that the industrial workers weren't even going to be the leaders of this revolution, as they at least were in 1917 in Russia – that was regarded as out of all question. Therefore when it happened, it administered a shock to the system. How many theorists there were in Moscow and how deep a shock it was and how sincerely and how deeply by this time they believed in their doctrine is something I can't tell you. But if they did believe it sincerely, they would have suffered an extreme intellectual trauma.

QUESTION [...].

BERLIN That is the question I never know the answer to. I don't think much, but it's an unpopular answer. Let me tell you. The old Russian sense of mission is what I ask myself about. Who ever generated the old Russian sense of mission? Dostoevsky. He

believed in it. He thought, in the famous Pushkin speech and in a great many other writings, that Russia was a Christ-bearing nation which existed for the purpose of converting others. Even old Slavophiles like Aksakov and Khomyakov didn't really believe in the Russian mission vis-à-vis the world. They thought that they were the chosen instrument of Christian revelation, and that they were the most Christian of nations, and that their medieval organisation was in fact both the most human and the most Christian form of existence known to man. They are said to have been [...] privately. But I don't think there's a very strong sense of missionary enterprise: there may be other names. Khomyakov did not convert the English. Aksakov was not interested in converting the French. Therefore when you say 'Russian sense of mission', people talk about the third Rome. Well, there was a monk called Philotheus, it can't be denied, who did say, 'One Rome perished, the second perished, and the third will perish no more',<sup>41</sup> but the monk Philotheus didn't leave a very deep imprint upon the history of the Russian Church. He lived when he lived, and there were occasionally certain antinomians who revived his words and said these sorts of things. I dare say among the sectarians there probably were some rather *exaltés* types who went preaching this kind of thing. But I think the notion of Russia as a messianic nation, with a messianic message for the world, is much exaggerated. And I think that, so far as Marxism was concerned, it was [...] Marxist mission which has taken over. And if you take someone like Lenin, he did not believe in a Russian mission ever. His idea was there would be a world revolution. Russia happened to be the weakest link in the Russian structure, as it turned out, and therefore it fell to the privilege of Russia to be the first country to start the great proletarian revolution, as it fell to the privilege of the French to be the first country to embody the principles of liberty,

<sup>41</sup> **'Two Romes have fallen, a third stands, and there will not be a fourth. And your Christian tsardom will not be replaced by another.'** 'Poslanie stariya Filofeya velikomu knyazyu Vasiliyu [...]', *Biblioteka literatury Drevnei Rusi*, ed D. S. Likachev and others (St Petersburg, 1997–2016), ix, *Konets XIV–pervaya polovina XVI veka* (2000).



fraternity and equality. But Russia wasn't doing it for herself. She didn't have any particular historical role. And the assumption was that once she started this great fire, it would take over the world. When it didn't, it was an extreme disappointment of the doctrine. Therefore the idea of this typical, unique Russian mission seems to me to be a piece of hindsight, a piece of reading backwards from the impression made by Marxism, by people like Berdyaev and others, into Dostoevsky, into the monk Philotheus, into various religious writings of this notion of the Russian mission. If you had asked an ordinary Russian intellectual round about 1850 whether he thought Russia had a special mission, I very strongly doubt if any of them would have had any idea what you meant.

QUESTION [...].

BERLIN [...] very much about – because I know very little about them. The early poets certainly. The early poets were people – it depended which side they were on. [*Audience member asks about Mayakovsky and Pasternak.*] Well, Pasternak was very different from Mayakovsky. Mayakovsky felt himself called upon to be the tribune and the herald of the rising world order. The poem on Lenin, and the poem called 'Yes' and so on, you see, all those things were – he saw himself as a great trumpet which was going to trumpet forth the world revolution [...]. No doubt about that. He had a strong sense of the mission of a poet, somewhat differently interpreted from the way in which it was done in the nineteenth century, in a violent, slightly hooliganish, arrogant, rude, awakening fashion.

Pasternak was somewhat more complicated. Pasternak, before the revolution happened – he saw it as a cosmic event, he saw it as something elemental, he saw it as something unintelligible, he saw it as something beyond reason, something which could not be explained in terms of ordinary rational [...], and he accepted it as a vast elemental force which the poet was forced to bow to and forced to interpret. But he never committed himself to it as a tribune of it. He was never a propagandist for it. He didn't see himself as an instrument embodying certain new revolutionary

values as against the old, and always stood aside [...] from events at all times, before [...] and after.

The poets of the last fifteen years: I simply don't know. I think they simply see themselves as voices of youth, sometimes voices of protest, at other times simply voices of the new youth culture, inspired by Hemingway, inspired by Vachel Lindsay, inspired by the noisier American poets, the noisier American writers, into simply expressing their own unrivalled, rich, new, healthy, vigorous, barbarous natures in a violent and memorable manner. Absolutely. Mandel'stam believed in art, Mandel'stam believed in beauty, Mandel'stam believed that if you [...] poet you have to write poetry. [*Inaudible intervention from the audience.*] Mandel'stam's principle object was simply to write poetry. As a citizen he may have accepted or rejected the revolution. He wasn't either a revolutionary or a counter-revolutionary poet. Mandel'stam believed in art above all, and salvation by art, and when the state became the kind of state that it did become, and it began to persecute him and other poets, and declared itself against the kind of art which he believed in, and insisted upon stamping upon him all kinds of restrictions and issued all kinds of [...] which seemed to him to vulgarise and crush any artistic impulse which anyone might have, he of course protested against it. But as a poet, what he really believed in was simply producing poetry, and nothing else at all, and resisted only when he felt that his integrity and his personality as a poet were being savaged by the regime. But he protested against the belief that he would [...] was the function of poetry to utter – to behave politically at all. I doubt if he would have said that it was. On the contrary, he would have said that the orders to poets to politicise themselves were in themselves absolute death to art.

Let me tell you a story in this connection, if I may. Pasternak, whom I knew, once told me that in 1934 – I don't know if this really happened, but this was his story – in 1934 he was informed that there was an anti-Fascist Congress in Paris to which he was summoned to come. Men appeared with some kind of morning coat and top hat, which was then thought to be the proper attire

for a poet appearing in Western Europe, he was put in an aeroplane and sent to Paris. He appeared on the platform that evening in Paris. There was there – I think Dreiser was probably presiding – a great many writers, E. M. Forster, Dreiser, Rebecca West, all kinds of people [...] all kinds of people [...] almost every liberal writer in the world of any eminence. [...] perfectly good liberal assemblage. And Pasternak appeared before them and said: ‘I understand that you are here to organise the fight against Fascism. Naturally, you know what my views about Fascism are likely to be. Nevertheless, let me tell you one thing. Do not organise. All organisation is the death of art.’ And sat down.

QUESTION [...].

BERLIN I couldn’t deny that. I wasn’t trying to explain the course of Russian history in terms of the influence of historicism on a group of Russian intellectuals. What I was trying to do was merely to say that there were more persons addicted to, or under the influence of, these historicist notions than there were in any other country, and these people were on the whole, in the end, because they believed in this so fanatically, highly effective. Once they were in power, they behaved exactly like any other group in power behaves in relation to the circumstances which surround them: they tried to resist any forces which they regarded as hostile. But even so, even under the pressure of what you quite correctly say – poverty, intervention and all the rest of it – an element of fanatical historicism lingered. That is to say, for example, their policy with regard to China, the failure to support the Communists at a certain stage, was due to the fact they had a theory of history in accordance with which certain events had to come first, certain events had to come later. And therefore, at that moment, the book said that nationalism is supported. The fact that, for example, the Communists in Germany in, say, 1932 were instructed to vote in the plebiscite as they did, and were ordered not to collaborate with the Social Democrats against the Nazis, was due to a dogmatic, historicist view that there were certain situations which were called

revolutionary and certain situations which were non-revolutionary. In non-revolutionary situations you created a popular front, in revolutionary situations you exacerbated existing disorders because they could work only in your [...]. I'm not at the moment saying anything for or against these things, only that they spring from an addiction to an absolutely dogmatic historical theory about the order in which events are inevitably bound to proceed. And this seems to me a heritage from the nineteenth century. I dare say they've shaken themselves free of it now, but it's taken a very long time.

QUESTION [...].

BERLIN Let me see. I have thought of particularly [...]. It's perfectly true that the white man's burden in Kipling, the general imperialist mystique of the 1890s, is a genuine form – a rather feeble form, but a form – of historicism. But that occurs only when imperialism comes under attack. It didn't occur in the eighteenth century, it didn't occur in the early nineteenth. When the empire was being created, when England was at the height of its power, which is in the 1860s and 1870s, it didn't need a theory or doctrine or myth in order to sustain it. The myth came later. It's only when attacks are made upon it, and when it wasn't quite so certain, when a certain amount of guilt ensued, and when people began wondering whether all this power was being wisely used, or wisely controlled, and by what right. They held down various native populations that by this time were beginning to resist such a [...]. The same thing occurs, I should have thought, in the case of America – I am less familiar with the facts, and I can't tell you, but I agree with you. I don't think it's an absolutely necessary condition for being inspired by historicist myths that you should be backward. My position is the opposite, that if you *are* backward, you are liable to use these myths as a prop or an incentive. But that people in non-inferior positions feel themselves empowered to march forward if some convenient myth drives them forward [...], as you say, manifest destiny or the American century, or things of

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that kind – that this actually does happen is, of course, not to be denied. I am not saying that countries in [...] power never have these myths; only that countries which are not in [...] power and need to get somewhere, because they feel an enormous [...] at stake and some degree of puzzlement, some degree of ignorance about how to use this – these people seem to be most liable to fall under the domination of those myths.

INTERVENTION FROM THE AUDIENCE [...].

BERLIN Yes, I see that. Yes. Still. But yes.

SINEL I think maybe we can have one more question. I think it was ...

QUESTION [...].

BERLIN [...] anyway that they do. That would involve me, no doubt, taking into account a very great many factors. I was confining myself only to the rather narrow question of when are these – what kind of situations are the situations in which historicist models particularly appeal to communities, whatever the other factors involved may be. It is quite obviously true that no country behaves wholly and exclusively [...]. [*Recording ends as tape runs out.*]

# The Russian Preoccupation with History

(BBC 1974)

MY SUBJECT is the Russian preoccupation with history, or rather with patterns of history, with historicism, with the laws of history, with the idea that history is subject to an inexorable and inevitable pattern, through which all human groups, nations, cultures must necessarily go. I do not of course mean that all Russians believed this, or were influenced by it; I refer only to some rather central figures in the nineteenth century, who created an atmosphere in which later intellectual developments occurred, culminating in the Russian Revolution – an atmosphere in which the ideology of the Revolution found it particularly easy to flourish. Let me begin by trying to explain the situation in Russia itself, as I see it, in which these ideas developed.

First of all one might ask: Why do people study history at all? There are many motives for this. Sometimes it is just a question of solidarity amongst a community. We are all the sons of Cadmus; we all come from Troy; we are all the children of Abraham; we are all descended from some mythical dragon; therefore we are all brothers and we all belong to the same group of mankind. That is certainly one of the most powerful motives for believing in history, both mythological and genuine.

Then of course there are patriotic reasons. There is the sense of past glory which buoys us up in difficult moments. There is the sense of the voices of our ancestors, of the great national tradition to which a given society feels it belongs, or wants to belong.

Then there is the whole notion that history is somehow a school for morals, that it shows human beings in the past behaving in various ways from which one can draw certain lessons for the present. It shows virtue and vice. This is the kind of thing which Leibniz and Voltaire, and, indeed, Thucydides and Hume and Buckle and all kinds of philosophers of history and historians, certainly supposed themselves to be studying history for.

Then there is the motive of simply collecting material for a natural science, say sociology, just historical material for the purpose of discovering whether there are not some laws which govern human history, much as laws govern nature.

There is also the question of what constitutes progress and what constitutes reaction – the sort of way in which Voltaire studied history, to show humanity in its finest or brightest hours, as against its darkest and worst hours, so as to attract people to ideal modes of behaviour, to set a beacon of progress before them and contrast that with moments of retrogression and barbarism.

There is also the view of history as a kind of drama, perhaps a great divine play in which all kinds of mysterious periods succeed each other – the story of God's word to man, the way in which human history is conducted by its divine maker.

The sense in which the Russians whose names I am about to mention took an interest in history is not quite any of these. They were chiefly influenced by that school of German historical philosophy which developed towards the end of the eighteenth century, in accordance with which men were made what they were by belonging to societies, and these societies in turn developed organically as plants or animals do, in accordance with certain discoverable laws or principles; and what a man was depended largely on the kind of society to which he belonged. The very idea of belonging, the very idea that a man develops most fruitfully and most happily amongst people with whom he is in some special way associated – by means of kinship, by means of common culture, by means of common language, by means of common memories – the idea that people only develop properly in the midst of their own proper culture, which the German philosopher Herder was chiefly responsible for propagating, that was the sense of history which particularly influenced the Russians. You may ask: Which Russians, and why?

Let me begin by explaining that very few, if any, ideas outside the realms of natural science, and outside, perhaps, art itself, were born on Russian soil. For the most part Russians borrowed ideas from the West and then took them very seriously, and in taking

them very seriously altered them. Nothing alters ideas so profoundly as being taken with utter seriousness by people who believe in them and try to lead their lives accordingly; and when these ideas were transformed simply by the deep faith in them which these people had, they ricocheted back to Europe, apparently in a new guise.

This is what happened with certain ideas of socialism, and it happened also with ideas of history. Here was this great country, full of untried energy, with a tiny educated class, with a small bureaucracy trying to govern a huge, ignorant peasant population, living in a condition of semi-barbarism, ignorance and squalor. It was removed from the main currents of Western civilisation by the Great Schism which bound it to the Greek Church, and it was precipitated into Europe by the invasion of Napoleon. It was feared and admired by Europe, admired for its vast strength as the greatest material power in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and at the same time despised as a great mass of uneducated barbarians – Cossacks. Russians were themselves filled with pride at their magnificent repulsion of the great French conqueror, whom nobody had before managed so utterly to defeat, and at the same time terribly conscious of their barbarism, their ignorance, their lack of education in comparison with the great educated countries of Germany and France, through which the victorious Russians marched in 1814 and 1815. If you can imagine that, you can also easily conceive that these people looked to the West for such culture, such civilisation as could be obtained, in a mood, as I say, at once of envy and pride. They felt inferior culturally, but at the same time nervous of being over-despised, resentful about being regarded as a huge barbarian mass – in a mixed mood, in other words, of envy and resentment.

The kinds of ideas which were prevalent in the West at this period sprang largely out of what is normally called the Romantic movement. I do not propose to try to summarise this movement in the little time that I have before me. Let me confine myself to this: One of the central concepts of the Romantic movement was that every man and every human group had a goal for which it was



created, an end or mission, to fulfil which was its very essence, its very nature; that it was perfectly proper for such human groups, more particularly nations or cultures, to ask themselves what would fulfil them most richly, what was the quintessence of their nature, and in what particular direction were they intended by that nature to flower. This was perhaps a notion that was born of a certain degree of inferiority, particularly in the case of the Germans, who felt humiliated by the French throughout the late sixteenth century and the seventeenth century. The Germans felt themselves to be both materially and culturally inferior to the dominant French, and were sooner or later to ask themselves whether they really were as poor a people as they were evidently thought to be by their triumphant Western neighbours, the French, and to some extent the English; and they naturally came up, as do all human groups which are despised or patronised for too long, with the notion that they could not be as inferior as they were thought to be, that they too had their place in the world, they too had some goal for which God or nature had created them – perhaps a superior goal, perhaps a higher destiny than that which these mocking, successful civilisations evidently prided themselves on.

The Russians were even more deeply in this condition. The first thinker to ask himself this question was an interesting man called Peter Chaadaev, a guards officer, an elegant, handsome, rather arrogant man, a friend of the great poet Pushkin, exceedingly well educated, who travelled abroad, read French and German easily, and was fascinated at once by German metaphysics and by the then current Masonic and other religious and quasi-religious movements. Some time after the terrible trauma of the failure of the Decembrist revolt against the Tsar, in which he was obliquely implicated, Chaadaev asked himself: What do we exist for? What is the purpose of the Russian nation? In the late 1820s he wrote a famous series of *Philosophical Letters*, of which only one was printed, in which he said: What is our goal? Where are we going? We know what Western culture is: it is a magnificent human achievement, from the days of the Greeks and the Romans onwards; first Greece, then Rome, then the Great Roman Church, which

preserved the cultural conquests and attainments of the classical age. This is the great model, this is the true culture to which all human beings naturally wish to attain. What about us? What do we have? When we look at our past we discover almost nothing. Here we are, wandering Slav tribes. And after our wanderings, what? Pale imitators of Byzantium in a period of decline, and then what? The Tatar yoke, which crushed us and humiliated us and brutalised us, and then what? The tsars of Muscovy, Ivan the Terrible, arbitrary tyranny, cruelty, blood, the knout, and then what? The eighteenth century, Peter the Great were nothing but tame imitators of the West, aping and parroting Western values without fully understanding them. That is our past. In short, our past is contemptible, there is nothing in it, it is empty. What are we? We are nothing but a blank page on which anybody who wishes chooses to write whatever he wishes. And what is to be our future? Who can tell? Why were we created? Every other nation has achieved something, but we, where is our literature? Where is our art? Where is our great past achievement on which we can look with pride? Perhaps we are simply a caution created by God to warn other nations of what not to do, where not to go.

One can imagine that this terrible self-lacerating letter, denouncing Russia for being culturally null, produced shock, and indignation, indeed, in some of his contemporaries. The Church and the state were equally indignant, and the Emperor Nicholas I caused Chaadaev to be pronounced mad, confined to his house, visited by a doctor weekly – a punishment which has since then not been entirely unknown in the case of other cultural dissidents. Chaadaev was the first of these. His importance is this: that he was the first person to pose certain questions to which the rest of nineteenth-century Russian thought and literature is to some degree one great continuous answer. The note of breast-beating, the note of self-denigration, plus the questions ‘Whither are we going? What is to be the future of Russia? What is the destiny of Russia?’, became obsessive to the whole of the Russian nineteenth century. Almost every Russian novelist writes about what it is to be Russian, castigates Russian vices, celebrates Russian virtues, and

is invariably preoccupied with the question of what Russia is, what it ought to be, where it ought to go. When the Russian writer Korolenko at the beginning of the twentieth century said ‘Russian literature became my homeland’,<sup>42</sup> everybody knew what he meant. He meant that it is Russian literature, with its obsessive self-criticism, with its questions of what Russia should be, why Russia was what it was, that is the natural home of self-conscious critical Russian thought. It would not have meant anything if, say, Somerset Maugham said ‘English literature became my homeland.’ Nobody would have known what Anatole France meant if he had said ‘French literature became my homeland.’ But in the case of Russia it was perfectly plain what these people meant. The revolutionary Alexander Herzen said that Russian literature is simply one enormous, continuous indictment of Russian life. This is begun by Chaadaev.

Let me explain that it is countries which feel themselves inferior, which feel that they have a great deal of health and strength and no culture to lean on, countries which were brought up by a Church with no real intellectual tradition, which is what happened in the case of the Greek Orthodox Church – lives of saints, holy living, yes, but no great scholastic tradition like that of the Roman Church – countries therefore which come to the feast of European nations lacking those intellectual and cultural qualities which they feel they ought to contribute, and therefore feel inferior – it is countries like this which are inevitably forced to ask themselves: What is to become of us? Where are we going? This is not done by successful societies. You do not find Dickens saying: Whither England? You do not find Stendhal saying: Whither France? But almost every Russian writer is preoccupied with this kind of question. Russian novels, Russian poetry are filled with it, and Chaadaev is the first person to sound this note, to put forward

<sup>42</sup> **‘Я нашел тогда свою родину, и этой родиной стала прежде всего русская литература.’** Literally: ‘I discovered my own homeland, and that homeland became, above all, Russian literature.’ *Istoriya moego sovremennika*, chapter 27: V. G. Korolenko, *Sobranie sochinenii v pyati tomakh* (Leningrad, 1989–91), iv 270.

what were later called the ‘accursed questions’<sup>43</sup> of Russian life, with which any responsible Russian was expected to cope.

Once the question was posed, it could no longer be avoided; and one of the natural ways of answering was to look in history. Perhaps by looking at the past of European nations, or of Russia herself, we shall discover some pattern which will tell us what the next step is. This is quite a natural thing to believe, particularly if you are under the influence of a Romantic conception of history, historicism, in the way in which many German thinkers were – of course in the first instance Hegel, but also opponents of Hegel such as the historical lawyers of Germany, who believed that laws were created out of the gradual organic growth of custom underneath the crust or surface of life, and that within this organic growth a pattern could be traced which was due to history itself, against which one must not proceed, because our very natures are made what they are by the peculiarities of our historical development.

If that is the kind of movement, the kind of vision of life, which is prevalent, there is nothing more natural than that the Russians should ask themselves: And we, what is *our* pattern? What should we be doing? And then there is disagreement. On the one hand there are the so-called Slavophiles, who say: Yes, there is a pattern of life, we know what to do, because we are not as other nations are. Someone like Ivan Kireevsky or Khomyakov – these are semi-theological Russian philosophers of history – explains: We must not imitate the West, the West is decadent, the West is rotting. The French Revolution was a condign punishment upon the straying

<sup>43</sup> ‘Proklyatye voprosy’. Although ‘voprosy’ was widely used by the 1830s to refer to the social questions that preoccupied the Russian intelligentsia, it seems that the specific phrase ‘proklyatye voprosy’ was coined in 1858 by Mikhail L. Mikhailov when he used it to render ‘die verdammten Fragen’ in his translation of Heine’s poem ‘**Zum Lazarus**’ (1853/4) no. 1: see ‘Stikhotvoreniya Geine’, *Sovremennik* 1858 no 3 (March), 125; and *Heinrich Heines Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Oskar Walzel (Leipzig, 1911–29), iii 225. Alternatively, Mikhailov may have been capitalising on the fact that an existing Russian expression fitted Heine’s words like a glove, but I have not yet seen an earlier published use of it.

of the West, as some Western Catholic thinkers, Maistre, Bonald and others, have quite rightly said. The West was developed by a mechanical despotic pattern, of which the Roman Church is the now somewhat degenerate embodiment. The free human spirit caught by this great bureaucratic order, this huge pyramid which the Roman Church constitutes, was stifled, and squeezed into compartments in which nothing truly creative, nothing truly spontaneous, nothing truly human could properly develop except in a rather constricted and maimed way.

The revolt against the Roman Church by the Protestants was quite natural, but that went to the opposite extreme. Instead of at least some collective, united movement of mankind, which, after all, the Roman Church had promoted during the unified Christendom of the Middle Ages, we now have nothing but an atomised individualism in which each man stands for himself, in which each man jealously guards his own privacy against others, in which men do not behave like brothers, men do not behave with love and affection for each other, but with suspicious protection of their rights. Any talk of rights always means that a society of this kind is in some way disintegrated: men erect walls against each other instead of that loving society which is the true goal of men, and which only the Orthodox Church, which was free from the ossifying influence of the Roman Church, free from the disintegrating influence of the Reformation, managed to realise. It is within the Orthodox Church that spontaneity, the free human spirit, creativity can truly assert themselves. Therefore if you say ‘What is the fate of Russia? Which way must we develop?’, we must look to the Greek Fathers of the Church. We must look to the origins of Christianity in Byzantium. We must look to this particular pattern which allows for the free and loving development of men who are not subject to some destructive and ossifying political framework, under which the nations of the West are at present groaning. That was the Slavophil sermon.

Against this the Westernisers said: Not at all, our condition is fearful. Chaadaev was perfectly right. All we have is serfdom, ignorance, lack of resources, poverty, oppression, arbitrariness at

the top, obsequiousness from below. On the contrary, we must learn from the West. Every nation goes through the same stages of development, but we are at a very primitive and very early stage of it. We must therefore go through those stages which the West has already gone through, and by means of which it has developed its splendid civilisation. We are barbarians knocking at the door, and unless we go through all the stages which the West has gone through, how can we ever reach their level of development in science, in politics, in art, in every province of the human spirit in which we are quite obviously so lacking?

Some thinkers, obsessed by this, asked themselves rather wistfully: Need we go through all the most painful stages of Western progress? Must we go through all the horrors of the Industrial Revolution, all the exploitation and degradation of human beings which quite evidently happened in England towards the end of the eighteenth century, and is happening there now? Must we really go through this? Or is it perhaps possible in some way to circumnavigate this? Is it possible for our village communes to enter into advanced technology without going through the terrible intermediate hell of the frightful exploitation, the terrible human cost through which the Western nations in the course of their industrial development seem to have gone?

These questions, quite apart from what the answers to them are, are all set in what might be called a historical framework. The assumption always is: If we can only discover what the pattern of history is, then we shall understand ourselves, understand where we belong, understand what the next move is. If we do not attend to these historical patterns we shall make terrible mistakes. It is only by understanding what is the proper ladder of human development that we shall know which rung we are on, and if we do not ask this question then we might very well try to get on to some wrong rung, some rung which has already been passed or some rung which we are not yet mature enough to be able to get on to, and this will surely lead to disaster. The only way in which we can progress properly is by understanding the reality with which we are dealing; and this reality is historically conditioned. This

notion of a ladder, this notion that there are certain stages, that we must know what stage we have arrived at – Are we at stage twelve or are we at stage seventy-four? What is the next move objectively dictated to us by the very movement of history? – this is something which becomes quite obsessive among certain thinkers in Russia.

Of course these things were discussed in the West also; I do not mean to say they were not. But there it was to some extent simply books written by various thinkers, conversations in intellectual salons; it did not really make a difference to what might be called the central thought or even action of these countries. In Russia it does seem to me to have done so. Take a very central thinker in Russian social thought, the literary critic Vissarion Belinsky. Belinsky really lived his intellectual ideas in a very painful and very agonised fashion. This is characteristic of the kind of Russian intellectuals of whom I speak: they really took ideas with utter seriousness.

Belinsky began by supposing that the Russians were ill-educated, unformed, immature, and therefore that the monarchy, the paternalistic despotism of Nicholas I, is all that barbarians of this kind could for the moment expect, because if they were liberated they would create chaos. This is roughly what a number of reactionary foreign thinkers like Maistre said about Russia, and that is how Belinsky began. Then he moved from this to the idea, derived from the German metaphysicians, that perhaps empirical life, everyday life, was of no importance. What mattered was the life of the spirit, which soared above everyday life, and if one could live in some ideal world, of which Fichte had spoken, of which the playwright and philosopher Schiller had spoken, then that is all that a man who really sought to understand the truth, who sought to realise all the potentialities within him, could do – and he could ignore the life of the masses, the life of the philistine bourgeoisie, which could not attain to such heights. But being a man of acute conscience, being a man extremely sensitive to the sufferings of others and with an extremely developed sense of moral responsibility for the misfortunes and the injustices experienced by others, he could not long linger in this condition.

He then crossed over to a Hegelian position. According to his understanding of Hegel, if one understood history properly then all the things which one normally condemned, all the injustices, all the horrors, all the cruelties, all the abominations of history, Philip II of Spain, the Inquisition, the brutalities, the injustices of tyrants – all these things could be seen to be inevitable stages in the ascent of mankind. Once you understood that these things could not be avoided, not only did you comprehend why they happened, but you also saw that they were all indispensable to the higher harmony towards which mankind was striving; and you ceased to resist them, you ceased to denounce them, you ceased to kick against them. To understand was to accept. And for a time Belinsky tried to justify all the abominations and horrors, as they seemed to him before, of Russian history, and indeed of the history of other nations also, on the ground that if one ascended to a higher vantage point one could see that all these apparent disharmonies, all these clashes, all these phenomena which seemed so ugly and so discordant if you saw them by themselves without relating them to other phenomena, were in fact ingredients of a higher harmony, and seen in the larger context of the whole of history they were clearly necessary elements in the ultimate self-understanding, self-liberation and triumph of the human spirit. For this reason it was childish, it was uneducated, it was un-grown-up simply to kick against these necessary pricks.

But of course, being a man of extreme sensibility, being a man of tender conscience, being a man, ultimately, who could not bear to stifle his moral intuitions too strongly, Belinsky rebelled against this and said in the end that he could not accept it, that he was not prepared, for the sake of some historical theory, to condone all the brutalities and the horrors, to see his brothers rolling about in the mud, to see all the blood and the injustice and the fearful vices and abominations of Russian society around him, simply because some philosopher or other said that this was necessary for the sake of some higher ideal. To the devil with the higher ideal: what one must do is to cure the immediate pains, the immediate sufferings on earth.



I am talking about Belinsky not so much because of the intrinsic interest of his own ideas, but because this was not familiar in the West. Belinsky tried to live his ideas, he tried to coerce his own consciousness, he tried to impose upon himself a new attitude towards human beings, towards art, towards literature, for which he cared most deeply, towards the political structure, towards moral and social ideas. He tried to force them into the framework of what on other grounds he believed to be correct; and the more difficult, the more painful, the more against his whole nature it was, the more he believed he had to do it. It is only if you force yourself to accept conclusions which appear unpalatable that you show true intellectual seriousness, true moral courage. This was typically Russian in some ways; and the fact that he rejected it, in the end, was simply creditable to his heart and to his moral consciousness.

You do not find comparable phenomena in the West, perhaps because the West was successful and Russia was backward. When a Russian thinker like Belinsky, or Herzen, at one period of his life at least, tries to justify a given reform or a given course of action, is in favour of reform against revolution, or revolution against reform, he tries to justify it on historical grounds. He says: This is the pattern of history; we have reached stage thirty-four, and therefore the next steps are thirty-five and thirty-six; we cannot do step sixty-two until we have been through the forties and the fifties, or through all the rungs of the ladder.

You do not find that in the West. You do not find John Stuart Mill, or somebody of that sort, if he is in favour of a reform, saying: What stage of history have we reached? Where is England on the ladder of progress? You do not even get so passionate and so Germanic a thinker as Carlyle asking this. When Michelet denounces the Jesuits or Napoleon III, he does not do it in the name of the fact that we have reached stage seventeen and the next stage in the ascent of mankind must be stage eighteen. He does it simply because he thinks that Napoleon III is a tyrant, or because he thinks the Jesuits are monsters of some kind; and when Mill or Carlyle or Gladstone, whoever it might be, speaks about this or

that as having to be done, the arguments are political, empirical, moral, but not historical in character.

This reliance on history, this attempt to make history the authority, is an attempt to convert history into a theodicy, to substitute the historical pattern for what, in earlier days, had been a religious revelation, or the authority of a Church which in Russia had evidently grown weak and somewhat compromised by its ignorance and its subservience to the state.

After Belinsky, we find someone like Chernyshevsky, who was a radical, a revolutionary thinker, and who says: Can we circumnavigate the industrial regime? Could we go straight from the village commune to some form of the socialism which we believe in? His reply is somewhat ambivalent. He says: No, we must go through the same stages as the West. We are not peculiar, we are not unique. What the Slavophiles say about our uniqueness, because we are not Catholics or Protestants – all this is nothing to do with the case. The factors which dominate history are economic and material, not religious and spiritual in the first place. He does think that, as a matter of fact, one can circumnavigate these factors, but only if certain steps are taken.

Herzen, on the other hand, says: Has history a libretto? Is there some scenario here? Do we have to obey it? He ends by saying no, he does not think history does have a libretto. No, the human will, voluntarism, is more important. We cannot confine history within the framework of our own puny historical theories.

It does not so much matter what these people say, whether you believe in a historical pattern, as Chernyshevsky does, or try to deny it in the name of free voluntary action by individuals, convinced of the value of the goals which they pursue, like Herzen. It does not so much matter which it is they say. The point is that they always have to come to terms with historicism. They always have to answer the question one way or the other, in a way in which Western thinkers do not evidently appear to have to do.

Chernyshevsky develops the theory that backwardness may have its own advantages. This comes from Chaadaev himself. The very man who denounced Russia for being nothing but darkness,

barbarism and the knout, after being pronounced mad, wrote another book called *Apologie d'un fou* (*Apology of a Madman*), in which he said: Maybe I was mistaken. Maybe God has created Russia for a special fate. Maybe the fact that we are backward means that we are fresh, we are young, we are unexhausted; perhaps we shall be able to profit by the attainments of the decaying West, in the way in which the West is too feeble to do. Chernyshevsky takes up this theme and seizes it. So do other Russian thinkers. Perhaps there is a certain virtue in backwardness. One need not go through all the agonies of, say, industrialism in order to profit by its results. One need not invent the machinery oneself. One need not make a lot of labourers unemployed and cause all the fearful social suffering which this entails. One need not have the labourers at all; perhaps one can use the latest products of European industrialism and graft them on to our system, which fortunately has no proletariat. Perhaps we can do without creating proletarians. Perhaps the peasant society can in some way centralise itself sufficiently to be able to use the industrial attainments of the West.

So it goes on; and this theory that backwardness is of a certain value, because there are certain inexorable stages, but you are allowed to pluck the fruit of a tree grown by other people, becomes their obsessive theme. First Chernyshevsky says it, then people say it towards the end of the nineteenth century, people say it in the twentieth century, and finally contemporary thinkers like Isaac Deutscher say it, and a great many developing nations in Africa and in Asia believe in exactly that, even now. In fact there obviously is some deep connection between being technologically inferior and looking to history to see what one can do. History offers a prop. It offers encouragement to proceed in a certain direction, which successful societies do not feel they need, because they can simply ask themselves what is the rational thing to do, without particularly bothering about alleged patterns to which they might look as a salvation.

You find this particular reliance upon history at all stages of Russian social thought in the mid nineteenth century. For example, there is quite an interesting argument in the 1870s between two

revolutionaries, Tkachev and Lavrov, about what one should do about bringing about a Russian revolution. Tkachev, who does not really much believe in history, who is a kind of Jacobin, who believes in creating a small professional revolutionary elite and making a revolution when and as we can, says: The peasants cannot help us. Peasants are reactionary and stupid. They will always betray us. The only way to make a revolution in Russia, to stop the injustice and the inefficiency that is going on, is by a small, properly trained body of revolutionaries who will organise a revolt and impose it upon the population, whether it likes it or not, for its benefit, but without its help.

But Lavrov, who is a gradualist, argues historically. He says: But this cannot be; this would be making a revolution before we are ready. This is premature. If we do this you will find that, in order to defend ourselves against the inevitable counter-revolution of the very peasants for whose benefit we have made the revolution, but who may not appreciate its value, you have to arm yourselves, you will have to impose a yoke upon them, you will have to coerce them. In the course of this you will brutalise yourself. In the course of fighting off the counter-revolutionaries you will turn yourself into the very kind of despot whom you are now, with every justice, trying to destroy in Russia. Until enough Russians have understood what the virtues of the new system, of the socialist system, are, until they have become educated, until history itself has moved forward to the point at which a revolution is possible, we must not do it. This is a direct appeal to history; and this is what Engels says – nothing is worse than a premature revolution, because that must inevitably lead to despotism.

So it is again when Bakunin – who does not believe in history, who believes in simply destroying the hated system and then trusting to the natural goodness and spontaneity of human nature, with the chains knocked off, to create a happier and freer universe – is attacked by Herzen, who says: This will not do. History has its own tempo, which you must observe. You cannot build a home for free men out of the bricks from which a prison-house was

built.<sup>44</sup> If you liberate them too soon you will find that the petit-bourgeois values against which you are operating, the very philistinism, the horrors which you are trying to eliminate, will be reasserted by the victors, who will have been brought up by these same philistines and philistine ideas; until they have been internally liberated they will not create a free world.

What I wish to stress is that the argument always proceeds along historicist lines, in terms of there being some sort of clock. One has to know which hour has been reached. The whole notion of putting the clock back, not going too far forward, this whole notion obsesses the Russians: the notion of a ladder, the notion of certain rungs as following each other in an inexorable order, the calendar which we must not anticipate.

So you can imagine that when Marxism finally came upon the European scene, it found a marvellously fertile soil in Russia, of all countries, which had already been prepared by this obsession with historical notions. Marxism was particularly congenial because not only did it emphasise what Russians of both the right and the left tended to believe – both right-wing historians like Chicherin and left-wing revolutionaries like Chernyshevsky, though they might hate each other, equally accepted the patterns of history – not only did it look like a powerful economic argument in favour of this pattern of discoverable laws of human progress, but it also tied them to the notion of natural science, towards which the Russians were naturally extremely respectful. It also promised a happy ending, and it also gave very good arguments, even better arguments than before, for loathing the irrational, oppressive and arbitrary government which was restraining Russian society from realising its full potential and attaining to rationality and freedom.

It was immediately, of course, opposed by those who were frightened of the idea of rigorous determinism. The socialist critic Mikhailovsky said: I do not wish to be the toe of the foot of some enormous giant called history,<sup>45</sup> so that I have no liberty at all, so

<sup>44</sup> See 29 above.

<sup>45</sup> See 28 above.

that I am operated by *it*, so that I do not choose but am chosen for, so that I have no real liberty of action but am simply a cog in some vast machine. Darwin, Marx tell me this, but it is not true. There is such a thing as human freedom, there is the human will. All the greatest attainments of mankind were made by men who operated in a free medium, not coerced into it, not conditioned into it, not determined by some vast pattern from which they could not escape.

The Marxist Plekhanov argued against that, and said: Not at all. There is an absolutely rigorous order of historical progress, and we have now reached the point at which Russian capitalism is emerging. Instead of trying to circumnavigate it, which is naive and impossible, we must help it along. We must in fact almost egg on capitalism, so that the ultimate destruction of capitalism, which is equally inevitable, occurs sooner. Capitalists, as Marx said, are their own gravediggers. The more rapidly they develop in our backward country, the more rapidly they will dig their own graves. Therefore, so far from obstructing them, as various populists and people with agricultural mystiques want to do, for fear of the growth of the capitalist system, we must on the contrary hurry them on, help them. This of course was a very bitter pill to swallow for people who said: How can we help our own exploiters? You are asking us actually to assist in the process of exploitation, of creating a proletariat? Yes, said Plekhanov: no proletariat, no revolution. That is what Marx said, and Marx, if you read his works, is perfectly right: there is no avoiding his conclusions.

There was a crisis in the Russian Socialist Democratic Party as a result of this. The free will problem, to which I have now come, has, of course, always obsessed individual thinkers. But it never became an issue for a political party to the degree to which it did in Russia. Individual philosophers might be troubled about it, individual men, but there were Russian Social Democrats who said: If history is inevitable, if the stages follow each other with absolutely irreversible necessity, then why should we risk our lives, and certainly our liberties, in fighting against the regime which kills us, and sends us to Siberia, and maims us, and arrests us, and

obstructs us in every way, if it is going to happen anyhow? Maybe it will take a little longer, but why should we take these vast risks for a conclusion which history will furnish in any case? And the then socialist leader, Struve, actually had to put forward the proposition that while ninety per cent of life was indeed causally determined, ten per cent was free, and within this ten per cent it was possible to make the Revolution.

In no other country did this have to be done. Jules Guesde, the leader of the Marxists in France, Karl Kautsky, the leader of the Marxists in Germany, English socialists – Sydney or Beatrice Webb – were not bothered by the problem of free will. But in Russia, because ideas were taken seriously, and because history was taken seriously, and because, therefore, historical determinism was taken seriously, socialists actually had to be told (it was useful, evidently, to say to them): We are not a hundred per cent determined. There is a realm of freedom in which it is possible for heroes, heroic revolutionaries, to be martyred for the sake of something, and not just for the sake of something which will happen in any case, whether they suffer or not.

So again, the Russian populists wrote letters to Karl Marx in London, and said: Do we have to go through industrialism? Cannot we perhaps achieve socialism by our own methods, by means of the famous peasant commune, the *mir*? At first, of course, Marx did not really want to listen to this, but in the end he conceded that perhaps, under certain conditions, if there was a world revolution or the like, revolutionary activities in Russia might lead to the emergence of a socialist order in Russia, even though they would not have to travel the whole industrial path of the West.

When Marx made this concession, Plekhanov, who was the leader of the Russian Marxists, thought that this would upset the Party far too much. It would create chaos: people would not any longer accept the central foundation of Marx's socialism, namely the inevitable determination of historical stages by economic development, by the class war. Therefore he actually suppressed the letter. It was published only in 1924. My point is that nowhere in the West would this have been necessary. It would not have been

necessary for French socialists or German socialists to suppress a letter by Marx for fear that their party might become demoralised or thrown into confusion. But in Russia these things were taken with the most passionate literalness, and therefore the situation really was spiritually different from that in the West.

It is so even in the case of Lenin, that most faithful disciple of Marx. Lenin was a man of revolutionary temperament, and naturally a man like that would suffer from a certain impatience if he was told that there was quite a long period of industrialisation, during which Russia would have to cease to be an agricultural country, would have to generate a proletariat, which in its turn would have to become the majority of the population, if all the conditions laid down by Marx for a successful socialist revolution were to emerge. And so in 1896, as a young man of twenty-six, Lenin tries to make out that the Russians have already reached this stage. He says: After all, peasants are in some sense capitalists, they are private owners of land; cannot we say that Russia *is* ninety per cent capitalist? Is not that all that Marx ever asked for? Cannot we regard the peasants as capitalists in his sense of the word?

It does not matter about the validity or invalidity of this doctrine. Even Lenin very soon came to realise that what he was saying bore no relation to reality, Marxist or any other. But the very fact that it had to be fitted into the framework of a theory of historical development shows that this is what mattered. It mattered to him in 1905, when the question arose: Shall we or shall we not make a revolution? The question was: Are we ripe or are we not? The very idea of ripeness – the very idea of asking: Have we reached 1848 or have we reached 1870? Are we on rung seventeen or are we on rung twenty-three? – is characteristically Russian. When Trotsky, at the beginning of the Revolution, says contemptuously to the socialist leader Martov: You must go to where you belong; the rubbish-heap of history<sup>46</sup> – you are obsolete, in other words; you are no longer relevant to what is going on – the very idea of this rubbish-heap, the very idea that history casts

<sup>46</sup> See 34 above.



off people to the right and left into obsolete waste-paper baskets, that we have to be of our time, that one can always tell who is backward, who is forward, who is where, presupposes a fairly rigorous historical pattern in terms of which you can classify people. Other people did not talk like this. Even Stalin, as late as 1947, officially at least, executed a certain number of people for, according to him, denying the inexorable economic laws which govern history and indulging in a heresy called voluntarism, which means ignoring or defying these laws of history. In the name of these historical laws you can kill, you can destroy, as you would not be allowed to do in terms of ordinary social morality.

I am not trying to say that every Russian thinker was obsessed in this way by historicism; only that there is a central tradition on both the right and the left which created conditions in which Marxism developed with particular fertility, with particular success, on Russian soil. Of course not all Russian revolutionary thinkers were historicists. Bakunin was not, Pisarev was not, Tkachev was not, Mikhailovsky was not. These people were free of it, but they were not central figures; at least, not as central as those who were historicists. Bakunin was the founder of anarchism, but anarchism never really took root in Russia to any profound extent. What took root in Russia was historicist Marxism. Tkachev was a splendid Jacobin figure, but his followers in Russia became fewer and fewer. What really won was the great historical movement culminating in the second Revolution of 1917. Tolstoy was not a historicist. He did not believe in the laws of history in the least, but even he had to come to terms with them – that is my point. In that famous Epilogue to *War and Peace*, in which he discusses the nature of history, he felt that he had to say *something* on the subject, if only to refute what he regarded as the absurd views of bogus Western science, or whatever it was that he regarded it as.

This kind of talk about history – not really about history, but about historicism, about meta-history, about patterns of history, about whether there were laws of history which had to be known in order to make rational progress possible – goes right through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The determinists look on

the libertarians as irrationalists, utopians, unrealistic, soft-headed. The libertarians look on the determinists as doctrinaires, people who twist facts in order to fit them into the theory, fanatical men who disregard human issues in order to force the poor resistant human material into a historical framework which is in fact bogus, unreal, simply the fruit of a false metaphysical theory. Russia is the one country in which this battle really has high historical significance. Maybe this is true of backward countries in general. Maybe this is true of countries in Africa and Asia, too, today, all of which ask themselves at what stage industrialism should begin. All the talk of imperatives of industrialisation, of launching-pads in W. W. Rostow's sense, all the talk of going through certain stages, imitating countries which have done it before, asking oneself what stage we have reached and what do we do next, which I am sure Marxist thinkers in Africa and in Asia ask themselves, may actually be the result of a certain relative backwardness, which then naturally fastens on to an inevitable historical pattern as something which guarantees ultimate triumph and success.

All I wish to say here, now, is that this preoccupation with the structure of history, quite apart from its validity or invalidity, appears to be peculiar to the Russians, and to ricochet from them to the rest of the world. It comes from the West, of course; it comes from the Germans, it comes from Hegel, it comes from Saint-Simon in France, it comes perhaps even from some of the thinkers of the French Enlightenment. It comes ultimately from the Judaeo-Christian tradition of a theodicy, of mankind historically pursuing certain divine goals. That is where it comes from, but in Russia it takes peculiarly concrete forms, because while in the West it still remains in the realm of theory, something which intellectuals, ideologists, professors discuss, in Russia it is actually lived in the way in which people in the West do not live their ideas – not with that degree of intensity, not with that degree of dedication, and not, one may say, with that degree of practical effect, both successful and disastrous.

FOUR LECTURES ON RUSSIAN HISTORICISM

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**First posted in the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library 3 February 2020**  
**Last corrected 15 February 2020**