



## Understanding History: The Decisions of Nikolai Berdyaev

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MARINA S. KISELEVA

## Understanding History: The Decisions of Nikolai Berdyaev

*The article focuses on the intellectual decisions that Berdyaev made, especially in the first decade of his professional life, and that indicate his adoption of Marxist, idealist, and mystical-Christian religious beliefs. It analyzes what impact those beliefs had on the evolution of his understanding of history.*

“After the weakening and disintegration of Europe and Russia, China and America began to rise—with time these two powers may find points of convergence.”

“History is my history—it is deep within me.”

—Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Fate of Russia*

Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948) was one of those rare philosophers who actually “practiced” existentialism throughout his life, combining his philosophical work with open public discourse. This may have been an internal, personal necessity for Berdyaev—resulting from his fate, which placed him in the most fiery events of Russian and European

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Translated by Peter Golub.

twentieth-century history, and divine providence, which he revered, believing in the reality of mystical experience.

In the twentieth century, people's personal history was tied up with global events of epic proportions—the collapse of empires, wars, revolutions, the redrawing of national borders, forced emigration on a massive scale, new schisms within Russian Orthodoxy, global crises, the extermination of millions of people, a test of faith, the rejection of God . . . All of Berdyaev's thought and writing is suffused with "tragedy," with the "tragic," with "drama." ("I am more dramatic than lyrical," he wrote in *Self-Knowledge*.) "Tragedy," "drama," and "paradox" were the words he used most often to describe the *con*-temporality of his life. Even when describing his experience in the Orthodox faith, he writes in a "tragic mode": "Not only did the tragic element remain unresolved, but I experienced the tragic as a predominantly religious phenomenon."<sup>1</sup>

Throughout his life Berdyaev asked questions such as: How to live in *such a time*? How to find oneself? How to connect the past with the present? How not to lose hope in the future? And in general: *How to save history through one's life*? But these were not the only questions that preoccupied the philosopher, leading him to write his works and to stake out his position first in Russia and then Europe. "In the epoch of cultural decline, the human soul reflects on the fate of cultures, on the historical destiny of humankind," he wrote in connection with Oswald Spengler's well-known book *The Decline of the West*.<sup>2</sup> These words also clearly reflect his own intellectual position. Philosophers always listen to their time, and as time changes, so do their positions.

The history of Russia and Europe, the individual in history, the possibility of making personal intellectual decisions . . . What causes or does not cause a decision to be made? What allows or prevents a person from making a decision? Is personal responsibility the same as decision making? How does a free person operate in a world created by divine will? And finally, what is the purpose of the "Russian idea?" The investigation and expansion of these questions, so prevalent in Berdyaev's writing, concern us as well, we who one hundred years after the beginning of World War I are still inquiring about the possibilities of freedom, personal decisions, and the limits of our responsibility in life, culture, and history.

In 1943, Berdyaev completed *The Russian Idea*, which combined an apologia for the Russian soul with a review of Russia's major intellectual figures and ideas. In the book, the author focused on the nineteenth century for at least two reasons. First, this was the century when Russian culture created its own intellectual foundation in the struggle between philosophical and political ideas; second, as a young writer, Berdyaev

understood the results of the nineteenth century and had played an active role in their articulation by summarizing the century's key ideas in journals, participating in its literary polemics, and interpreting the ideas of Russia's European contemporaries. As a university dropout (who plunged into political struggle) what ideological positions did Berdyaev initially adopt? He was arrested in 1898 and exiled from Kiev to the distant city of Vologda. At the same time he was actively engaged in journalism—reading and analyzing not only the work of Russian thinkers, but also translating for the Russian reader the work of European philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists.

### Reference point

Berdyaev's critical study of Nicholas Mikhailovsky, *Sub'ektivizm i individualizm v obshchestvennoi filosofii* [Subjectivism and Individualism in Social Philosophy] (1900), was written before his exile, and clearly captures what he considered to be the main themes of nineteenth-century Russian philosophy. These themes relate to "man, and man's destiny in society and history."<sup>3</sup> Examining the sociological and journalistic writings of the major Russian sociologist, well-known publicist, and theorist of populism, the young critic focuses on the founding principles that defined Mikhailovsky's reasoning. Berdyaev shows that in sociology the "subjective" method was the product of positivist and social-Darwinist theory (popular in Russia during 1860–70), and that the theory of "individualism" was based on the social philosophy of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (which Mikhailovsky had translated). He argues that Proudhon failed to establish a real connection between the individual and society, (substituting that connection with an abstract "ideal" in which real individuals are "typified" as petty-bourgeois shopkeepers fearing for their work in the industrial economy of capitalism), and that "populist" ideology has its own reasons for ignoring the historical necessity of capitalism as an economic system, and for being averse to its development in Russia. Berdyaev concludes that "Mikhailovsky's conception of 'personality' [*lichnost'*]\* is as insubstantial as his conception of 'society' [*obshchestvo*]<sup>4</sup>—a purely fictitious concept, an ideal abstraction of biological, not sociological, content."<sup>4</sup> If we agree that criticism of

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\*The word *lichnost'* is used throughout Berdyaev's work and Berdyaev scholarship. Its closest translation is "person." *Lichnost'* means a living human, with a unique composite of characteristics that make up an individual personality. In this article, *lichnost'* is translated as "personality."—Trans. & Ed.

another's work often reveals the personal position of the critic, what was Berdyaev's intellectual position at the end of the nineteenth century?

Berdyaev criticizes the "organicism" method of subjectivism from the standpoint of Immanuel Kant's transcendental philosophy, and points out that the German classic came to Russia late, only in the 1880s. Both Berdyaev and Peter Struve (who wrote the preface to the young author's first work) provide a detailed account of the assimilation and acceptance of Kant's epistemological theory. In connection with Mikhailovsky's method, Berdyaev comes to the conclusion that "Objectivism has a purely logical meaning; its foundations are firmly rooted in transcendental universal human consciousness; objectivism is necessary for consciousness—there is no room for subjectivism. Subjectivism has a purely psychological sense; it is rooted in psychological consciousness and is caused by the social environment and social groups; . . . but there is no place for it in cognition" (109). Berdyaev went on to write about the absence of a logical connection between "necessity" and "desirability;" assuming, however, that there exists a psychological and historical link between them. This allows him to make a "conciliatory" step from Kantianism to Marxism when he criticizes Mikhailovsky for completely isolating the individual from society: "The historical and psychological grounds for reconciliation is the progressive social class, which has the greatest harmony between *objective cognition and a subjective relationship toward life*" (109). In other words, the idea of progress and the proletariat's "objective" expression of that idea, as a revolutionary class, quite captured Berdyaev.

In this article, my aim is not to present a detailed catalogue of Berdyaev's arguments in this early work. Struve did this in his preface. However, Berdyaev's commentary throughout his polemic with Mikhailovsky is helpful for understanding the depth of the former's ideas concerning historical materialism in the context of different philosophical schools, trends, and concepts of late-nineteenth-century Western philosophy, as well as, for understanding the development of his intellectual preferences.

Berdyaev entered the literary field with his translation of Ludwig Stein's book *Friedrich Nietzsche's Weltanschauung Und Ihre Gefahren* (1893), published in installments in the journal *Mir Bozhii* (1896). Work on the translation and reading Nietzsche had a strong influence on Berdyaev's own writing. Although these would seem to be incompatible with Berdyaev's negative view of individualism in contemporary philosophy and what he called: the "theoretical trend" of "*universalism* in all fields of knowledge" (186; see note 1). However, following this quote, he immediately writes that this trend is complemented by "a unique individualist sentiment that is expressed in contemporary art." In a

footnote, Berdyaev goes on to discuss the latest “decadent” currents, which “express extraordinary spiritual refinement,” and to criticize those artistic trends that combine this with “nervous destruction,” and concludes that “a healthy social foundation” will allow these new currents to develop into “marvelous future art” (186). With time Berdyaev would devote much of his writings to the problem of human creativity, discussing its dependence on or independence from the “social soil.” His ideal in the field of knowledge and morality was already being formulated in the sense that individual life can “effloresce,” if the “*the individual can connect with the universal*” (ibid.). Berdyaev believed this idea supported the necessary development of the unity of philosophical and ethical thought. It is significant that in this unity he finds the answer to a persistent problem, in spite of his progressive Marxist ideas. Referring to the ideas of Baruch Spinoza (specifically that “immortality is gained after a comprehensive love of God”), Friedrich Schiller, and Wilhelm Wundt, Berdyaev clearly articulates the principle of universal and individual unity, arguing for an entirely nonhistorical-materialist thesis: “Only on this basis can the problem of immortality be resolved” (186–87; see note 2). Berdyaev concludes his discussion, and (perhaps unintentionally) shifts his focus from the end of nineteenth century sociology to the ideas of universalism found in the early nineteenth century: “Universalism is characteristic of all the great philosophical systems. The quest for eternity is eternal; it is the reflection of supra-individual consciousness within individual consciousness, and encompasses the healthy impulse toward individualism. There will come a time when humanity returns to idealism” (ibid.). This last statement is indicative of Berdyaev’s further intellectual work.

### Point of equilibrium

The development of his own idealistic philosophical position occurred over a lengthy stretch of time. There are two basic paths a young revolutionary writer, exiled in Vologda, could have taken toward idealism.<sup>5</sup>

The first is the formation of a highly individualist position that would have corresponded with the inner state of Berdyaev’s mind and his tendency toward scholarly work, as well as his “aristocratic” demeanor, which set him apart from his contemporaries—it was no coincidence that his fellow exiles considered him as belonging to the group of “aristocrats.”<sup>6</sup> In his study of Mikhailovsky, Berdyaev wrote about a variety of individualist characters, who included Mikhailovsky, Proudhon, Nietzsche, Max Stirner, Eugen Dühring, Mikhail Bakunin, and Leo Tolstoy. He was acutely aware that their differences were so great that “they would likely kill each other.”<sup>7</sup>

Individualism was actively explored by Berdyaev; however, for him, pure individualism lacked any *historical meaning*.

The other “path” would have led to a rethinking of the historical process, which would have entailed a rejection of the Marxist progressivist model, and the view that history is the expression of a natural process governed by fundamental laws. But what should replace it? How to understand history (which for Berdyaev was not be the sum of the biographies and achievements of seminal thinkers)? Berdyaev’s path toward idealism involved an attempt at a theoretical synthesis of both ways—that is, a point of equilibrium between the two controversial sides of personality and history.

The occasion for Berdyaev’s research became the work he did for the appositely named anthology of philosophical articles, *Problemy idealizma* [Problems of Idealism]. The collection was released in late 1902, (although the cover date is 1903). Its original title was polemical—*V zashchitu idealizma* [In Defense of Idealism]; and a still earlier title was *V zashchitu svobody sovesti* [In Defense of Freedom of Conscience]—a reference to Leo Tolstoy’s conflict with the church.<sup>8</sup> The collection’s initiator was Peter Struve; the editor (chosen for both academic and political reasons) was the lawyer, liberal, and professor of philosophy at Moscow State University Pavel Novgorodtsev, an expert on the legal systems of Kant and Hegel, about which he wrote his 1901 dissertation at St. Petersburg University. As we will see, of the two paths outlined above, Berdyaev decided on the “individualist.” The title of his article for the anthology was “Eticheskaja problema v svete filosofskogo idealizma” [Ethical Issue in Light of Philosophical Idealism]. The task of the article was clearly stated: “to attempt to formulate the question of ethics on the grounds of philosophical idealism.”<sup>9</sup> The article was placed between Struve’s work (published under the pseudonym P.G.), which provided an overview of “our philosophical development” and criticized Mikhailovsky’s work (juxtaposing it with S.P. Ranskii), and an article by Semyon Frank on Nietzsche’s philosophy. Berdyaev prefaced his article with two epigraphs from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, combining them with a formulation of the categorical imperative and one of Kant’s philosophical, almost poetic, symbols of individualism: “*Der bestirnte Himmel über mir, und das moralische Gesetz in mir . . .*” (117).\*

“The mystery of the historical process” that worried Berdyaev in the previous study, is barely mentioned in this article. His idea was to attempt to combine individualism—based on Kant’s idea of duty—with Nietzsche’s nihilism—critical of the morality of the banal, “choral” man who is equally

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\*“The starry heavens above me and the moral law within me . . .”—Trans.

concerned with welfare and virtue. However, universalism was still important for Berdyaev, and he found it impossible to refuse altogether. How then can individualism and universalism be reconciled, if the real social connections between people “in existence” are omitted, including in the sphere of morality?<sup>10</sup> How does Berdyaev come to understand that “individualism inevitably leads to universalism” (138)? Personality and individuality “are everything in the context of ethics,” because “*it is through these we comprehend* universal spiritual content.” In the field of morality, this transcendental unity of apperception should lead us away from empirical reality into a realm where people are connected via their highest transcendental ideality. It is clear that the decision here is predetermined by a higher spirituality—God: “Man is holy and inviolable not in the name of random empirical content; he is holy and inviolable as the bearer of the highest spiritual principles” (139). Thus, Berdyaev sets the stage for a “new religiosity,” by claiming that transcendental universalism connects individuals through “spiritualism.”

Berdyaev begins the section of his article dedicated to an analysis of “the herald of a new positive free morality” by saying: “it is now impossible to write about morality without saying something about Friedrich Nietzsche . . .” (145). In his previous work, Nietzsche was introduced as a representative of “aesthetic-aristocratic individualism” alien to “any social motives.”<sup>11</sup> Here Nietzsche is portrayed as a harsh critic of “historical morality” in the form of altruism, utilitarianism, hedonism and evolutionism—all that Berdyaev himself distrusts. Noting many points of “contact” with Nietzsche, Berdyaev sees him as a “deeply religious soul” (145), longing for “the lost Divine” (147) and having found a new religious-mystical idea of the “superman.” Reflecting on this idea, Berdyaev argues that Nietzsche “strays” toward a biological understanding of the superman, having found it devoid of morality, stemming from the laws of the empirical world, of earthly reality. This is where the German philosopher, in Berdyaev’s opinion, goes astray. At this stage, concerning the idea of the superman, Berdyaev prefers Thomas Carlyle with his “cult of heroes.” Trying to “reconcile” Nietzsche with Christianity, and to find further impetus for modern individualism, Berdyaev frees Christianity from its own history, and imagines it as an “ideal (nonhistorical) doctrine” with its reverence for the dignity and inner freedom of the individual. This freedom is the “immortal moral essence of Christianity,” its “inner morality” (149).

When developing the theme of freedom, it is impossible to completely ignore the problem of social equality. This theme brought Berdyaev back to social reality, because social equality cannot be discussed in the context of duty alone. There arises the problem of the conditions of its realization. At this

stage, Berdyaev sought to solve the problem of the metaphysics of duty through equal rights and “class parity”—thus, still preserving the Marxist idea of the progressive struggle of the oppressed classes for freedom.

Of course, having made this “decision,” Berdyaev establishes a rather tentative “equilibrium”: the ethical clearly outweighs the social and the individual clearly outweighs the universal. However, in order to find a common denominator for this “weak balance,” Berdyaev places “spiritual aristocracy” at the center of his idealist ethics, raising it above the morality of groups and classes. Spiritual aristocracy becomes the new drive behind a person’s progress toward self-realization, concerned with their own unique path of personal development, which leads to the realization of a person’s duty to fulfill the “law of their ‘I.’” The problem then arises of solving the social contradictions present in the world and its history, which may interfere with this new progress.

Berdyaev finds a solution within his own concept of idealism, and proposes “a metaphysical rejection of evil” (153), which removes the well-known problem of theodicy: “sensory nature is by itself not evil, it is ethically neutral, it becomes evil only when it hinders the development of the *personality*, when it dims higher consciousness and self-fulfillment” (153). In the same way Berdyaev dismantles another classical idea of ancient philosophy—*kalokagathia* (καλοκαγαθία). For humanity, *kalokagathia* can no longer be used to unite the aesthetic and the moral, because in the field of aesthetics evil manifests itself as a “*stikhiinaia*\* play of forces,” going beyond ethical values, with evil still possessing its great aesthetic “value.” Here Nietzsche’s Dionysian foundation is more than appropriate. Berdyaev exalts the “Dionysian thirst for life,” which somehow miraculously brims with “valuable content” (Berdyaev’s emphasis) and manifests the “divine-human ‘I.’” The modern beginning of the century shows the human transfiguration toward a complete voice, continuing the synthesis of God and humanity, first proposed in philosophy of Vladimir Solov’ev.<sup>12</sup>

And yet the task remains that of the few. The decision of a single transfiguring personality cannot be a closed process taking place inside like-minded and isolated aristocratic singularities. Berdyaev acknowledged this. He attempted to conceive of a future, where it was possible for free people to be unified, by formulating the concepts of individual freedom and public

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\**Stikhiinnost'* is an important concept translated as “spontaneity,” “deviancy,” “elemental force,” “chaos,” and a number of other ways. The indeterminacy of the term is in a way part of its definition. In Russian, it is often opposed to consciousness (*soznatel'nost'*).—Trans.

freedom, and by ascertaining, in society and history, the struggle between social groups to realize the “natural law” of human personality. He found such a possibility in the liberating struggle of “intellectual souls” to establish a “new idealistic direction” to satiate their “spiritual hunger” (158). Here, I think, Berdyaev finds the term that will be key for the next phase of his intellectual development. In the early twentieth century, during the rapidly changing events of Russian and world history, the role of the intelligentsia in society and culture becomes a standalone theme. Soon Berdyaev will not be able to restrict the ideological controversy to the “intelligentsia souls.” He will have to take a *specific position* within social reality, within its wars, revolutions and reforms, within a real, albeit weak, tsarist power and its aggressive or passive reactions to events. In other words, the day-to-day and minute-to-minute existence of society, accumulating in the annals of history, forced the Russian intelligentsia to actively participate in these events and try to understand them. However, the “new idealism” was still unable to acknowledge this reality.

### **The point of self-determination**

In 1905, it was impossible to ignore the revolution. At that point, Berdyaev’s life underwent a serious shift. His exile was behind him. He had been transferred from Vologda to a one-year exile in Zhitomir, a relatively large cultural center in the south of Russia, where he met his future wife, Lydia Rapp. The young couple moved to St. Petersburg, where Berdyaev plunged into the intellectual and publishing life of the capital—he gained a new circle of friends, published new articles, and began developing new ideas. Georgy Chulkov invited Berdyaev and his old friend from Ukraine, the philosopher Sergei Bulgakov, to write for the journal *Novy Put’*, which was financed by Dmitry Merezhkovsky. This invitation allowed Berdyaev to meet the Symbolists, who had started a new and fashionable artistic movement in St. Petersburg. Chulkov recalls the “period of decision” experienced by his new staff writers: “At that time, Bulgakov and Berdyaev had experienced a second spiritual crisis. Former adherents of ‘dialectical materialism,’ they had now drunk from the cup of Kantian poison and could no longer return to the camp of their recent associates. Now, dissatisfied with Kant’s idealism, they were on the threshold of a new worldview. . . . They both tended more and more toward ‘positive religion,’ but were tied up in contemporary terminology, and still unable to make a clean break with the traditional approaches to spiritual culture.”<sup>13</sup> The events of the revolution were likely the ultimate test of their adherence to existing concepts. History forced Berdyaev to completely revise his theoretical framework.

His ideas changed not only at the desk, but also in life. By 1907 Berdyaev had published two books: *Sub Specie Aeternitatis: Opyti filosofskie sotsial'nie i literaturnie* [*Sub Specie Aeternitatis: Philosophical, Social, and Literary Experiments*] (1900–1906) and *Novoe religioznoe soznanie i obshchestvennost'* [*The New Religious Consciousness and Society*] (1907). These books were written by Berdyaev at a time when he was participating in a new social scene. This included Merezhkovsky's salon, Sunday meetings at Viacheslav Ivanov's apartment (nicknamed the "Tower"), visits to Vasily Rozanov, and the publication of the journal *Voprosy Zhizni*. This scene was extremely rich and diverse. It contained writers and poets, philosophers and theologians, artists and dramatists, many of whom were well known but still quite young. Chulkov wrote that Berdyaev "had a tendency to be coquettish when it came to aesthetics. He loved Verlaine, Huysmans, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, and all the fashionable authors of the decadent canon."<sup>14</sup> In *The Russian Idea*, Berdyaev described this period as a "cultural renaissance," which overtook Russia in the early twentieth century. However, everything that happened in those circles was distant from the revolutionary events of 1905; although the prologue to the 1905 Revolution—Bloody Sunday (January 9)—was experienced acutely by Berdyaev. It could be said that Berdyaev's shifts toward religious reformism and mystical theocracy was caused by the events of the revolution and his own internal evaluation of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat. It was a form of aversion to the real events of the revolution, and the reaction of the government. At the same time Berdyaev offered his own "historical" prediction: "The Black Hundred, hooliganism, and reactionary fanaticism pose . . . a real danger, but all these forces have no future. Inside the social-democratic religion there grows a cult of earthly force and power."<sup>15</sup>

In *Novoe religioznoe soznanie i obshchestvennost'*, Berdyaev took the familiar position of criticizing obsolete ideas, which only recently had been his own. The decision was radical, but not rash. Berdyaev had worked through these ideas in his previous articles, and in his interactions with fellow god-seekers (the Merezhkovskys, Bulgakov, Rozanov, and many others).<sup>16</sup>

New idealist horizons appeared, calling the free creative personality to God, faith, and the possibility of human transfiguration in a theocratic society—the premonition of the Kingdom of God on Earth. This was a combination of a religious and mystical ideas, aesthetic experience, rules of everyday life for the development of the creative personality in society, as well as among "intensely self-aware" creative people who attempted to understand "the secret world of individual destiny." Berdyaev called this newly formulated religious-philosophical-social "attitude toward being": "the real-mystical sense of personality;" the direction of philosophy was the

“*new religious consciousness*” or “*neo-Christianity*” (VI–VII). It was meant to replace what had only recently been accepted, but was now vehemently rejected, by the thinker.

Berdyaev severely criticized: (1) “the necrotic church” and “the torpor of religious consciousness” and its governance; (2) positivism, atheism, and “rationalistic consciousness” inherent in “the false religion of social-democracy;” (3) anarchist irrationalism, chaotic mysticism, which only strengthened “social nihilism.”

Berdyaev’s decision to embrace the mystical was an attempt to create a modern synthesis in pursuit of a new century. He was trying to substantiate the religious “perception of the Divine as a concrete historical fact,” as Christ was, and then “publicly” apply it to the path “of a real unification with God” (XI). This was the synthesis that would produce a theocracy.

Much of Berdyaev’s mysticism comes from Friedrich Schelling: “Strictly epistemological mysticism can be defined as the identity of subject and object, as a merger of a human being with the universal being, as communication with the world that is not determined by it” (XIII). Although, Berdyaev referred to Plotinus, Plato, Jacob Boehm, Baruch Spinoza, and Franz Baader, and even Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Arthur Schopenhauer as philosopher-mystics. At this critical juncture Berdyaev uses the term “meaning of history,” in a general mystical context, but as the term developed, it became the next step of his philosophical evolution: “Objective mysticism, tied in with the meaning of world history—that is my thesis” (XVII).

Among the diverse religious quests of Russian intellectuals, Berdyaev’s position differs in its philosophical foundation; although, it was quite different from even the most progressive representatives of normative Russian Orthodoxy. No Russian Orthodox leader could have come up with the following: “I need a religion to discover the meaning of my existence and the meaning of world history, so that my personal meaning would forever be bound to the meaning of the world. I hope that in religion, in religious gnosis, in religious epiphany the mystery of my identity, what I am, where I am from, and why I am will be revealed to me; I will understand the mystery of the world, of the reality to which I am meaninglessly bound, to which I want to be bound meaningfully” (XVIII). In this “identity-centric,” practically utilitarian attitude toward God and religion (although Berdyaev himself rejected utilitarianism) the meaning of history was defined mystically through the history of the world’s religions. “World mystery” and “world meaning”—the Word (Reason, Logos), which contains “living, concrete existence” or in the language of Christianity—Christ (XVIII). This is the doctrine Berdyaev defined as the “supra-rational,” which unites “the Reason in me” with “the Reason in the world,”

which represents one and the same divine Reason—"universal Meaning." A Hegelian type of progressivism is noticeable in terms of the "historic churches, which betrayed religious freedom." In a revelation, understood as a free and real connection "with the fundamental principle of being," "our mystical experience" is conceptualized by Reason. "In its essence, religious revelation is related to the philosophical discovery of truth" (XX)—thus, the Russian philosopher once again returns to Schelling.

Before, Berdyaev used Kant to build his ethical system, but at this point, he rejected the "moralistic, Kantian-Tolstoyan description of religion," categorically separating religion from morality, but leaving intact the relation between morality and aesthetics (XXV). The salvation of humanity (which is how Berdyaev now understood the revolution) lay in Christ who is "the mystical-existential act, the mysterious act of freedom and love, the supra-moral and supra-rational" (XXVII). In this act, according to Berdyaev, "the tragedy of the world" is overcome, and tragedy, horror, and fear, are "not in religious life, but outside it" (XXVIII).

The most significant philosophical-religious consequence of this new concept was the rejection of asceticism and the "deification of man," which are replaced by the epiphanic image of the "eternal feminine," divine beauty, and the idea of "God-man [*bogochelovechestva*]"—a "religious assertion of the 'corporeality' of the world and the cosmos, which . . . had yet to exist in the history of Christianity" (XXXIV). Berdyaev saw in this the mystical meaning of world history: "religion must become secular in order for the world to become spiritual" (XLV). The new religious consciousness could not exist without the unity of the Dionysian and the Apollonian (N.B. a new appeal to Nietzsche): "Without Dionysian forces, being has no mystical *stikhiinost'* and life cannot exist, but without Reason, which gives form to chaos, life has no meaning and being no purpose—there is no potential for the achievement of universal harmony and beauty . . . . The Dionysian gives life, the Apollonian gives it meaning" (IXL). This is not "mystical anarchism," which is individualistic.<sup>17</sup>

This is a search for the meaning of world history within the earthly destiny of humanity, in order to "understand and illuminate its great culture, and guide us toward the aesthetic creation of future righteous society"—ruled theocratically, with "prayer" as the primary relationship between humanity and the world (XLIV; IL). The foundation of Berdyaev's ideas are the novels of Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky, in particular the issues raised in Dostoevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, in "The Grand Inquisitor" chapter, and Tolstoy's position on the issue of religion and his excommunication from the Russian Orthodox Church.

In this book, Berdyaev works through the issue of government, considering it from a number of angles and arguing for the implementation of “nongovernment” and “supra-government” law, which reflects the divinity of human nature. He describes “socialism as a religion,” and the Marxist position of the Social Democrats as a vulgar expression of religiosity built on the earthly interests of humankind. Positive socialism for him is liberal and stems from the “truth of the individual,” which is opposed to Christian socialism, connecting old religious consciousness with the new “non-religious plans of social construction” (119). At first glance, the problems of gender and love seem out of place in the book, but in fact this is where Berdyaev brings together the personal, ethical, social, and religious. He categorically separates the metaphysical definition of personality and family—the natural human principle connected with family, childbirth, and the status of women. Berdyaev is forced to admit that “family is the death of personality and personal love—in such an environment Eros languishes” (177). But the revolt of personality against family, against population growth, against property runs into a problem, which, according to Berdyaev, produces a state of confusion and bewilderment in an entire generation. This raises the question of how else can humanity be united? How to achieve a “new uniting love? How to transform humanity into a divine race” (174)? His investigation of theocracy provides an answer: “The full implementation of the kingdom of love, the highest incarnation of Eros in the life of the world is only possible in a theocracy, in the kingdom of God on Earth as it is in heaven . . .”—the mysterious entry into the mystical church of Christ (190).

It can be said that this mystical program reflects the religious pursuits of the Russian intelligentsia in the early twentieth century, when the 1905 Revolution (which took place in real time, not in “eternity”) did not fulfill the hopes of the enthusiastic and talented intellectuals of the time—here it is possible to see the cause of the global turn to mysticism. The prospects of a “philosophy of *sobornost*”<sup>\*</sup> became for Berdyaev a means of resolving the

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<sup>\*</sup>Webster’s Online Dictionary defines *Sobornost* as “spiritual harmony based on freedom and unity in love: ecumenicity; specifically: the principle of spiritual unity and religious community based on free commitment to a tradition of catholicity interpreted through ecumenical councils of the Eastern Orthodox Church –compare conciliarity.” (April 15, 2015, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sobornost>). *Sobornost* is usually translated into English as “togetherness,” “community,” “catholicity,” and “organic unity.” The term is introduced in writings of Alexei Khomiakov and Ivan Kirievsky, the founders of the Slavophile movement. Yet, its origins can be found in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The word is derived from the Slavonic/Slavic noun “sobor,” which means “council,” “church,” and is related to the verb “sobirat” - gather or to bring together.—Trans. & Ed.

conflict between the individual and the social at its highest level. “All religious knowledge is supra-individual and *soborno*, as all philosophical knowledge is *soborno*, and reason by its very nature is *soboren*, and all appreciation of the world’s mystery is achieved only when the soul of the world merges with the church” (196). It is this process of *sobornost’* that became for Berdyaev the embodiment of the organic connection “with living concrete history” (196). Like Solov’ev, Berdyaev saw the manifestation of *sobornost’* in the unification of independent religious communities “within the universal body, organically rather than mechanically, by an internal mystical process, not through an external law . . .” (219). In this way, theocracy becomes “the absolute norm of society” and “the goal of history.” However, Berdyaev refused to see the 1905 Revolution as a “religious revolution.” Rather, he saw it as a “stage of world development,” and an expression of “our hooliganism” (224–25).

Berdyaev ultimately refused to connect the progress of humanity with expressions of social change and class struggle. His understanding of progress became eschatological and included “the idea of the noble end of history,” which has two possible outcomes: “either the kingdom of God is established on Earth—the kingdom of Christ, or the kingdom of the prince of this world is established on Earth—the kingdom of the Antichrist” (231). Of course, the aspirations of Berdyaev are associated with the first outcome of the religious “fate of history.” Theocracy, the millennial kingdom of Christ on earth, the replacement of the state by the church, is the realization of progress. Berdyaev continued to adhere to these ideas. Also, his confidence in righteousness, and the philosophical and religious foundation of his quest, suggest that he never considered the utopian implications of his ideas. His metaphysical faith gave him the strength to carry on his ideological struggle. The next phase of this struggle was the article, “Philosophical Verity, and Intelligentsia Truth” (included in the collection of essays, *Vekhi*, 1909), in which these ideas become a powerful critical tool directed against the revolutionary democrats, and against the politically biased and atheistic thought of the intelligentsia, which had abandoned God for the idea of serving the people.

### The meaning of history

Not only did World War I disrupt daily life on the European continent, it also influenced the work of intellectuals. During the war, Berdyaev wrote short articles, which were later published together as *Sud’ba Rossii. Opyti po psikhologii voini i natsional’nosti* [The Fate of Russia: Experiments into the Psychology of War and Nationality]. The problems at the center of

the book were “the psychology of the Russian people,” “nationality,” “humanity,” “messianism,” “imperialism,” “the folk soul [*narodnaia dusha*],” “war and its meaning,” “politics,” and “identity and community.”

For the first time, his historical writings began to take on less religious and more secular tones. His criticism of the Russian intelligentsia in the article “*Voina i krizis intelligentskogo soznaniia*” [War and the Crisis of the Intelligentsia] (1915) could have been applied to himself. Berdyaev wrote: “the traditional consciousness of the intelligentsia has never been drawn to the historically-specific, having always lived within abstract categories and values.”<sup>18</sup> In this book, Berdyaev did not offer anything particularly concrete for understanding the new challenges confronting Russia in connection with the war. But he quite clearly outlined the range of issues that have become relevant for Russian history and culture: “The consciousness of our intelligentsia did not want to know history . . . . There existed no nationality or race for this consciousness, no historical destiny or historical diversity and complexity, there were only the sociological classes and abstract ideas of good and justice” (45).

The time came when Berdyaev was ready to consider history as its own “independent reality” with its own values, such as, for instance, nationality, “which is a concrete-historical, not abstract-sociological category” (45). During the war, the Russian intelligentsia was acquiring a new set of values, which needed to be maintained and articulated to the rest of the world during the inevitable, as Berdyaev believed, process of Russia’s Europeanization, its involvement “in the cycle of world history”: “The Russian intelligentsia, freed from provincialism, will finally enter the historical sphere and will bring its thirst for truth on Earth, its (often unconscious) dream of world salvation, and its will to create a new and better life for humankind” (49). It is hard to see in this proposal the specific work that would be done, but Berdyaev’s prediction came true in the sense that the Russian intelligentsia was forced “to enter the historical sphere” of Europe. It was separated from Russia by the very people that Berdyaev and the “Vekhists” had in the past accused of abstract sociology, lack of education, and obsession with utilitarian economic issues . . . . It would be another seven years before the landmark year of 1922, seven years of life and work, of war and revolution. As it turned out, no one in Europe was particularly waiting for the Russian intelligentsia and its thirst for truth . . . as is, in general, the case today.

Berdyaev saw this entrance into world history from a geopolitical perspective, and discussed Europe’s spiritual and ideological unity in the article, “*Zadachi tvorcheskoy istoricheskoy mysli*” [The Tasks of Creative Historical Thought] (1915): “The World War presented both Russia and

Europe with the perpetual theme of East and West in a concrete new form . . . with unprecedented intensity and specificity we will be presented with not only the external questions, but also the internal spiritual ones about Turkey and Pan Slavism, about Palestine, about Egypt, about India and Buddhism, about China and Panmongolism” (132–33). Historical thought must be creatively directed, which implies “the recognition of independent historical reality” and “unique metaphysical reality,” which, as Berdyaev rightly observed, requires the appropriate categorical apparatus “for thinking about history and its objectives” (133). This he would develop in later years.

The second Russian revolution was another historical fact that Berdyaev subjected to detailed ideological, historical, and cultural analysis. During the revolution, he published articles in *Russkaia Mysl'* (a popular Russian monthly) and in weekly periodicals. These articles were posthumously published as *Dukhovnie osnovi russkoi revolyutsii. Opyty 1917–18* [The Spiritual Basis of the Russian Revolution: Experiences from 1917–18]. These articles deal with the same set of issues as those written during World War I; however, here Berdyaev not only gives a general description of the main problems, but condemns Bolshevism, the Russian revolution as a historical disaster, the crisis of Russian culture, the attack on national consciousness and national spirit, the victory of equality over the freedom of personality, and others.

During the winter of 1919–20, Berdyaev gave a series of lectures at the Free Academy of Spiritual Culture. The lectures concerned the religious philosophy of history, and later served as the foundation for his book, *The Meaning of History*. Together with the article “Volia k zhizni i volia k kul'ture” [Will to Life and Will to Culture], the book was published in Berlin (1923) after Berdyaev's expulsion from the Soviet Union on the “ship of philosophers.” Considered together, these books about the revolution and the meaning of history give the impression that Berdyaev was trying to reconcile historic events—the revolutionary catastrophe that occurred before his eyes—and keep his sense of a meaningful history. The conception of history in this book constitutes an existential decision for Berdyaev. It was in this work that he develops the categorical apparatus of the metaphysics of history, which he wrote about back in 1915.

In *The Meaning of History*, he combines the metaphysical and theological conceptions of history in ten chapters—in the first chapter, he begins with a discussion of the nature and significance of the historical process, and in the last chapter, he discusses the eschatological end of history. In the context of the revolutions, the eschatological themes of history are more than understandable. However, to construe the meaning

of history in terms of its end means to invoke the death of humanity. Antagonistic toward the family, children, “the human race,” its biological continuity, and not seeing in all this the possibility of realizing the human purpose of becoming a free personality (of which he wrote extensively in *Novoe religioznoe soznanie i obshchestvennost*), in this work, Berdyaev finally comes to the ultimate conclusion of his philosophical program. The freedom of the creative personality—that is the *alternative* to history. Following the sacrifice of Christ (bearing in mind not only His death on the cross, but also His subsequent resurrection) is the tragic fate of the individual who hopes to attain heaven. However, history, Earthly history, is thus ended. This is Earth’s “fate;” its history and meaning are transcendental, but the manifestation of its fate is tragic. “The metaphysics of history has shown that what is impossible within history is possible outside it. And this is the main argument for the existence of history’s higher meaning.”<sup>19</sup>

However, it is clear that humanity will never access this meaning in its earthly existence. Up to the book’s last pages, Berdyaev cannot conceal the polemic implication of his argument. In the last paragraph, he writes about the pessimistic metaphysics of history, which makes a break with illusions about the future. (Consider the physical continuation of humanity discussed above; incidentally, this also relates to his appreciation of Fyodorov’s ideas, especially the concept of the “resurrection of the fathers.”) Berdyaev “abandons the idea of progress,” because its future vector is the most illusory; instead, he offers the idea of “hope and recumbence for the resolution of all of history’s suffering in future eternity, in the future of eternal reality” (161). This is Berdyaev’s concept of the meaning of history, which he developed drawing on his experience of World War I and the October Revolution.

The book is full of arguments based on historical and cultural observations, and insights into the trajectories of cultural evolution taken from Judeo-Christian texts and the works of European philosophers. On this basis, Berdyaev reconstructs the meaning of the philosophy of history. He follows Hegel in the evaluation of the Hellenic world as an ahistorical society, understanding it “aesthetically” as a static circular harmonious space (22). “Historicity was introduced into the world” by the Jews and the asseveration of the messianic idea by the prophet, Daniel (23), and is also present in the eschatological ideas of the ancient Persians (26). Finally, in the sixth chapter Berdyaev presents a detailed argument in support of the internal connection between Christianity and history. This reasoning shows the powerful influence of Schelling (esp. his “philosophy of revelation”), who wrote of the internal connection of history and Christianity, which is a

“revelation of the Divine in history” (84). Although, here Berdyaev refers to Schelling’s earlier work *Vorlesungen über die des akademischen Studiums* (1801). The three most interesting chapters are devoted to the Renaissance and its spiritual, and not only spiritual, consequences in the culture of the West, and especially in terms of its producing the ideas of human freedom and humanism: “The experience of modern history is none other than the experience of a free disclosure of human strength” (101).

Also of note are the two conclusions (worked out in the context of the Russian sphere) presented in two theological chapters with the same title: “O nebesnoi istorii.”\* In the third chapter Berdyaev discusses God and humanity, in terms of his already articulated theory about the movement toward “God-man” in Christian history. The fourth chapter concerns time and eternity, which shows the influence of Augustine, and sets up the further eschatological conclusions regarding the end of history.

In this analysis, we have reached a tipping point in Berdyaev’s biography and intellectual search, and chronologically we have reached the end of his life in Russia. There is a marked prophetic connection between the historical collapse of the Russian Empire and the eschatological concept of the meaning of history in Berdyaev’s last book written in Russia. He himself thought a great deal about the prophetic gift of the philosophy of history, delving into the past, and thereby revealing the future (32). Having left Russia, he continued to make intellectual decisions. As a thinker, his connection to Russia was henceforth memorial, about which he wrote as a means of combating eternity and building his philosophy of history. In his subsequent books, *The Worldview of Dostoevsky*, *Self-knowledge*, *The Russian Idea* and other major works (on the freedom of creativity and humanity, on spirit and reality, and many others subjects) he could not get away from the subject of “world history” or his memory of Russia, which in reality no longer existed, but remained in his spirit and his fate.

## Notes

1. N.A. Berdyaev, *Samopoznanie: Opyt Filosofskoi avtobiografii* (Moscow: 1990), p. 170.

2. N.A. Berdyaev, “Predsmertnye mysli Fausta,” *Smysl tvorchestva* (Moscow: Astrel’, 2011), p. 367.

3. N.A. Berdyaev, *Russkaia ideia* (St. Petersburg: Azbuka-Klassika, 2012), p. 120.

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\*“On Celestial History.”—Trans.

4. N.A. Berdyaev, *Sub"ektivizm i individualizm v obshchestvennoi filosofii* (Moscow: Atrel', 2008), p. 183. (Further references to this work are made in text by citing appropriate page numbers.)

5. O.D. Volkogonova, *Berdyaev* (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 2010). The third chapter presents an excellent description of the lives of young exiled revolutionaries, in the northern province of the European part of Russia in the early twentieth century. These included A.A. Bogdanov, A.V. Lunacharsky, B.V. Savinkov, A.M. Remizov, P.Y. Shegolev, and many others.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 51. Berdyaev often wrote about his aristocracy. For instance, in the first chapter of *Self-Knowledge*, "The Aristocratic World," he writes: "I admit to being an aristocratic thinker who has come to recognize the truth of socialism" (5).

7. *Sub"ektivizm i individualizm v obshchestvennoy filosofii*, p. 187.

8. V.V. Vostrikova, "Problemy idealizma" (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2010), pp. 7–8.

9. N.A. Berdyaev, *Problemy idealizma* (Moscow, 1902), p. 91. All other citations are made to *Problemy idealizma*, in "Eticheskaia problema v svete filosofskogo idealizma" (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2010).

10. Berdyaev criticizes positivism and evolutionism, including also Marxist history: "Evolutionary theory often conveniently explains the evolution of morals, moral meaning and customs, but morality itself is beyond it, because moral law exists outside its narrow purview" (see: endnote 2, p. 128).

11. *Sub"ektivizm i individualizm v obshchestvennoy filosofii*, p. 187.

12. V.S. Solovyev, "Chteniiia o Bogochelovechestve," *Collected Works*, vol. 2, pp. 4–172.

13. G.I. Chulkov, *Gody stranstvii*. April 4, 2014 <http://www.rulit.net/books/gody-stranstvij-read-273495-31.html>

14. *Ibid.*

15. N.A. Berdyaev, *Novoe religioznoe soznanie i obshchestvennost'* (St. Petersburg: M.V. Pirozhkov, 1907). (Further references are made in roman numerals in reference to the introduction, and in arabic numerals in reference to the main text.)

16. See the responses of Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Zinaida Gippius, Lev Shestov, Andrei Bely, Mikhail Tareev, and Semyon Frank to Berdyaev's concept of "new religious consciousness." In: A.A. Ermichev (Ed.), *N.A. Berdyaev: pro et contra* (St. Petersburg: RKGU, 1994), p. 146–221.

17. For more on mystical anarchism see: V.P. Kosharnii, "'Misticheskii anarkhizm' v Rossii nachala veka," *Gumanitarnie nauki. Filosofia* (2008), no. 2, pp. 50–56.

18. N.A. Berdyaev, *Sud'ba Rossii* (Moscow: 1918), p. 44. (Further references are made to this edition.)

19. N.A. Berdyaev, *Smysl istorii* (Moscow: Misl'), p. 161. (Further references are made to this edition.) [In English published as: *The Meaning of History*.]