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How Should One Evaluate the Soviet Revolution?

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Abstract: The essay begins by discussing different ways of evaluating and making sense of the Soviet Revolution from Crane Brinton to Hannah Arendt. In a second part, it analyses the social, political and intellectual background of tsarist Russia that made the revolution possible. After a survey of the main changes that occurred in the Soviet Union, it appraises its ends, the means used for achieving them, and the unintended side-effects. The Marxist philosophy of history is interpreted as an ideological tool of modernization attractive to societies to which the liberal form of modernization was precluded.

Keywords: Ethical evaluation of social events, Soviet revolution, continuities between pre-revolutionary and Soviet Russia

1 Introduction

We may want to let the short twentieth century begin in 1914 or in 1917, but the Soviet Revolution will remain one of the most important events in the past century. To its comprehensive evaluation a century after the fact, perhaps a philosopher may contribute something useful. For the Soviet Revolution is, first, such a complex phenomenon that the perspectives of a single discipline, and even of various single disciplines juxtaposed to each other, will miss something important about this historical event. A philosopher, although a dilettante concerning each individual facet of the phenomenon, may enjoy a bird's eye view, which can never replace but can maybe complement the specialists' analyses. There is, second, the need for a normative evaluation of what happened to the Soviet Union and Russia in the course of the last hundred years. And with regard to the normative dimension, philosophy has something to offer precluded to both historiography and jurisprudence. Historians try to understand historical events, and while good historians must also try to understand the value attitudes of the actors of the historical process that they investigate, this does not entail that they themselves have special competence with regard to normative questions. Jurists, on the other hand, pass normative judgments; but these normative judgments are relative to a given

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legal framework whose validity they presuppose in their work as jurists. Revolutions, however, deliberately break legal continuity, and revolutionaries are usually not deterred by the awareness that what they are aiming at is illegal—for they know it, and this is the whole point of their activity. Some people might want to defend the proposition that the revolutionary break of constitutional legality is always immoral, but whatever the truth of this position, its province is certainly not law but political ethics, and we need normative principles transcending positive law in order to judge it. Needless to say, if a revolution is successful, as the Bolshevik revolution was, it creates new law, and in order to implement that law socially, it educates hosts of jurists whose task it is to interpret and defend it, warding off all attempts to return to the earlier system by labeling them as counterrevolutionary illegal acts.

My approach will combine an ethical analysis with an attempt to understand the social causes that brought forth the revolution; and I will also touch upon the complex issue whether this revolution makes sense in the whole of human history, that is, I will include some reflections that belong to the province of philosophy of history. Even if today a neglected and controversial discipline, philosophy of history remains important when approaching the Soviet Revolution for two reasons. On the one hand, the Soviet Revolution was itself justified in terms of philosophy of history, and one must be able to enter into this way of thinking in order to understand the motivation of the actors. On the other hand, while I will reject as unacceptable the justification the Soviet Revolution gave of itself, I do believe that abstract ethics without an understanding of the nature of human history is too slim a basis for making moral sense of such a complex event as the Soviet Revolution. We need a much better philosophy of history than that provided by Marxism-Leninism; however, this does not mean we can dispense with all philosophy of history in order to evaluate historical events.¹

I will proceed in the following manner. First, I want to mention two pairs of alternative ways of dealing with the Soviet Revolution: the one is related to different stances with regard to historiography, the other to varying moral and political ideals (*section 1*). Second, I want to look at some of the remote causes of the Soviet Revolution in order to show how it continued more than it transformed the traditional Russian mentality (*section 2*). Third, I will look at the main changes it brought about. Particularly, I want to discuss why the Soviet Revolution seemed to promise a solution to the basic problem of the Russian search for identity (*section 3*). Finally, I will propose a brief evaluation of the October Revolution according to three different criteria: its own ideals, the means used for implementing them, and

¹ For my own neo-Hegelian approach to the philosophy of history, see Hösle 1997, 542–621.

the objective results of the Soviet Revolution (*section 4*). While attempting such an evaluation may seem at first glance naïve, I think that after a century the moment has arrived in which such an evaluation may reasonably hope to transcend one's own historical situatedness.

2 Different Attempts at Evaluating the Soviet Revolution

In 1938, twenty years after the October revolution, two important books putting the Russian Revolution into a broader context appeared in the USA. The first, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, was authored by Harvard professor of history Crane Brinton (1898–1968), the second, *Out of Revolution: Autobiography of Western Man*, was in fact a re-elaboration far more than a translation of a book that had appeared already in 1931 with the title *Die europäischen Revolutionen. Volkscharaktere und Staatenbildung*. The author, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy (1888–1973), in 1933 had emigrated to the USA.² In 1939, Brinton and Rosenstock-Huessy reviewed each other's books in a venomous way. That they were asked for reviews is hardly surprising given their common topic: revolution. Even the concrete revolutions they deal with overlap to a large extent—Brinton deals with the English, French, American, and Russian revolutions, Rosenstock-Huessy (who separates the American revolution from the other) furthermore includes the papal revolution of Gregory VII and the Reformation. Both ignore changes of constitutional continuity based merely on personal power struggles and not inspired by general moral ideas.

The main reason for their rivalry is that their intellectual ambitions are quite different. Brinton wants to compare the four revolutions and find *uniformities* in the development of revolutions, such as factors that facilitate them (for example, the delegitimation of the old order by intellectuals); the formation of different types of revolutionaries, who usually do not come from the most oppressed classes; the replacement of moderates by extremists (fortunately avoided in the American revolution); the reigns of terror and virtue; and the Thermidorean reaction against the latter. He insists on imitating the methodology of the exact, natural sciences, as understood by contemporary fallibilists (1952[1938], 7ff.). A historian has to leave out from his work his personal hopes and fears (11f.) and

² A sign of the increasing interest in his work in the USA is the long article about him in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

therefore has to avoid the temptation of fitting the revolutions he has studied into a philosophy of history (290).

Rosenstock-Huessy, on the other hand, presents one of the most complex philosophies of history of the twentieth century: He is interested in the differences between the various revolutions, which partly are due to the distinct natures of the European nations, and at the same time he is searching for the *progress* of humanity through its various revolutions. Inevitably, the vastness of his interests leads him to some imprecisions. Yet his specific historiographic stance is reasonable: One cannot write history as if it were from outside, as an entomologist observes insects; for what we ourselves are is the result of history, and so the ultimate end of history must be to make sense of our own position in history. This form of teleological approach does not exclude at all the thorough search for the concrete causes of historical events. But all these causes are supposed to contribute to an evolution toward a goal—toward what we are and at the same time toward what we ought to be. “The world’s history is our own history. If it were but a world’s history, [...] it would be nothing but a hopeless library of dust.” (1938, 7) This explains why the English version of the book proceeds in its first part backwards—from the Russian to the French and English revolutions and the Reformation—trying to reconstruct the present predicament.

But why should philosophy of history focus on revolutions? A revolution in Rosenstock-Huessy’s sense is far more than the mere break of the continuity of constitutional law. “Revolutions bring forward the question of the type of society which ought to exist. This question is even more vital than a war. [...] To be sure, the word ‘revolution’ does not apply to the events like the hundred and twenty revolutions in Mexico.” (76) Only when the break in constitutional law is connected to a radical change in our normative ideas, we have a revolution that is relevant for the ‘autobiography of humanity’. Revolutions are the decisive laboratories in which national identity is formed: The French nation, for example, is unintelligible without its revolution. But Rosenstock-Huessy claims more. Even if revolutions are radical breaks of continuity, a coherent narrative of their series is possible. For he follows Hegel in the assumption that despite all the breaks in history, caused by revolutions, there is a hidden continuity. The secret telos that according to Rosenstock-Huessy connects the papal revolution of the eleventh century to the communist world revolution is, on the one hand, as in Hegel’s philosophy of history, a progress in freedom (32) and, on the other, an increasing awareness of a common destiny of humankind (712).

The second great split in the approaches to the Soviet Revolution concerns the question of how to evaluate it. The self-interpretation of the Soviet Revolution is well-known: It is supposed to be the final, proletarian revolution that prepares the classless society, a continuation and improvement of the French rev-

olution, assiduously studied by the Bolsheviks, but with the claim to overcome the half-hearted compromises and hypocrisies characteristic of the bourgeoisie whose class interests the French revolution favored.³ Even among those who did not share the Soviet self-evaluation, one can find the position that at least the Soviet Revolution led to a successful modernization of Russia (see Cohan 1975, 217); sometimes it is added that the revolution alone enabled Russia to withstand the German attack and finally defeat National Socialism. On the other hand, there is the position, first clearly articulated by Hannah Arendt (1958[1951]), which sees not in the Soviet experiment as such, but in its result, Stalinism, the closest equivalent to National Socialism. One of Arendt's most fascinating claims is that Stalinism comes much closer to National Socialism than Italian fascism and other dictatorships in interwar Europe (308). For the essence of totalitarianism, which is different from despotism, tyranny, and dictatorship (460), consists in the manipulation of the masses by totalitarian propaganda and organization, in systematic terror, mainly perpetrated by a secret police, as well as in a total domination, which achieves its pinnacle in concentration and extermination camps. Arendt does not deny that the ideological justifications of totalitarianism in the only two cases that she recognizes are different; but she sees many parallels in the institutional arrangement of the societies so that these differences pale in her concept formation. An alternative condemnation of the Soviet Revolution can be found in Wittfogel (1957). According to the German Sinologist and former Marxist, Russia was subjected to Asiatic despotism by the Mongolian conquest, and the Bolsheviks continued a typically Asiatic mode of centralized production that had had its origin in the need for irrigation in a hydraulic economy. The main problems of this thesis are the simplifying opposition of Western and Asian mindsets and the underrating of differences within both continents. Spengler uses a no less stereotypical opposition when he insists on the legitimate Western lineage of the Bolsheviks, who in his eyes are truly heirs of the French revolution—but this is still an indictment, since he detests the latter too. The 'Asian' nature of a revolution according to him is most clearly expressed in the destructive fury of the Pugachev uprising (1961[1933], 120f.).

The two types of oppositions—causal vs. teleological and positive vs. negative evaluation—, while conceptually different, are not logically independent from each other. For a teleological interpretation presupposes a positive appreciation; there is no reasonable way to integrate National Socialism into a history of progress in the consciousness of freedom. If the Soviet Revolution is analogous to

³ This explains why the French and the Russian revolutions have even more in common than either of them with the English. For a comparison of the two revolutions see Mayer 2000.

the legal revolution of the Nazis, it must be treated as one of the many outbursts of violence in history. It may still shed light on the nature of humankind, but it cannot claim a place among the other three great revolutions to which most people ascribe the achievement of greater legal and political equality and whose positive effects are still with us, increasingly extending over the whole globe.

3 Russia before the Soviet Revolution

It is well known that according to Karl Marx, Russia was not likely to develop a socialist revolution on its own. His aversion was not limited to tsarism but extended to Russian culture in general, which he perceived as particularly retrograde.⁴ Russian culture was markedly different from Western, and one has to understand these differences in depth if one wants to grasp the nature of the Soviet Revolution; for despite all its universalist and modernist pretensions, it was, like Tatyana in Alexander Pushkin's *Eugen Onegin* (*Евгений Онегин*), “русская душою,/ Сама не зная почему”—“Russian in its soul, itself not knowing why” (V 4, 1f.). The hope that a new form of society could be grafted upon Russia as upon a ‘tabula rasa’ was illusory.⁵ I am aware of the fact that the search for ‘national traits’ is not unproblematic, for they may change over the course of history. And it is even more problematic in the case of a multiethnic empire such as Russia, for the population of this state was more heterogeneous than in other countries. The Soviet Revolution was indeed brought about by people of different ethnic backgrounds—suffice it to mention the Georgian Stalin. Still, common historical experiences, a common lingua franca, and a widely shared religion, perceived as dominant even by those who did not belong to it, connected the various ethnic groups of Russia, and it is a reasonable hypothesis that under these conditions national traits formed, which even survived the revolution. Needless to say, such a hypothesis may be falsified, but it is worthwhile trying to see how far it may lead us. It may also help answering the question to where Russia is headed today, for the collapse

⁴ See the texts collected in Marx/Engels 1972. While Marx recognizes in the preface to the second Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto* that the Russian *obshchina* may be transformed into a higher form of communist property without having to go through capitalism, he links this possibility to a simultaneous revolution of the workers in the West (70f.). Marx's contempt for Russia, whose language he knew, becomes evident in his letter to Kugelman of October 12, 1868 (74).

⁵ The metaphor comes from Leibniz, who uses it in a paper written in 1711 for his meeting with Peter the Great in Torgau; see Guerrier 1873, 180. It is, however, limited to Russia's scientific development.

of the Soviet Union in 1991 unleashed a return to earlier national traits once their revolutionary transformation was rejected.

The first factor with which to begin is geographical: Even before the expansion to Siberia, the population density of Russia was low; the vast expanse of land led to a very different ratio of villages and towns than in Europe. Certainly there were some important medieval Russian towns, in which the seeds for a possible social evolution toward greater freedom existed—I mention only the first Russian capital, Novgorod. But its Veche, the popular assembly, was abolished when Ivan III conquered the city in 1478, and the brutal sack of it by his grandson's *oprichniki* in 1570 signified the end of the city's prominence. A country with such a huge territory that could be attacked from many different parts had to consider its defense its paramount responsibility. As it is no accident that the motherland of European liberalism is an island, so the lack of protection by natural borders and the experience of the long Mongol rule favored the acceptance of autocracy. (The study of connections between geographical position and political structure has nothing to do with the unacceptable geopolitical doctrine that states should annex neighboring areas to protect themselves by natural borders.) When after the fall of Constantinople the doctrine of Moscow as a third Rome was developed (around 1560 in the *Book of Royal Degrees* (*Степенная книга*) and even earlier, around 1500, in *The Tale of the Princes of Vladimir* (*Сказание о князьях Владимирских*)), Byzantine Caesaropapism was revived. Despite the trade connections inaugurated between Russia and Western Europe in the sixteenth century, the latter early felt that Russia was different. In the German literature of the seventeenth century the greatest expression of this feeling is to be found in ch. 20–22 of the fifth book of Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus*, which are inspired by Adam Olearius' travelogue. The hero experiences lack of freedom of movement, constant supervision, bizarre generosity, and at the same time no security of personal property, which is ultimately subject to the tsar.

What are the main differences between tsarist Russia and the contemporary Western polities? The Renaissance never occurred in Russia, and modest rudiments of Enlightenment begin only after Peter the Great opened the country to the West. Russia got its first university only in 1755, in Moscow, and had to wait until the nineteenth century for the next. Peter's reforms made Russia a European great power, particularly by increasing taxation, without which his military successes would not have been possible and which ended the national humiliations of the seventeenth century; I name only the Polish-Muscovite war 1609–1618 with the Polish occupation of Moscow and the treaties of Stolbovo and Cardis with Sweden, in which Russia had to renounce its claims to Estonia and Livonia. At the same time, Peter deepened the dependency of the serfs. His absolutism was much stricter than the contemporary absolutism in Western European states, because

these countries boasted a civil society that remained a social counterweight to the legal powers of the crown—powers that in the Netherlands and in the United Kingdom began to be limited drastically already in the course of the seventeenth century. Napoleon's invasion, and even more his defeat and the march of Russian troops to Paris, confronted the Russian elites with Western cultures in a completely new way and led to a perception of the contrast between Russia's military strength and her legal and cultural backwardness. The failure of the Decembrist revolt made it clear that a transition to Western European political models would not occur in any foreseeable future, since the only legal means for constitutional changes were concessions by the tsar, which were unlikely to occur.

The old doctrine going back to Aristotle about the importance of the middle class for the stability of a society is proven negatively by the social structure of the Russian empire in the nineteenth century. At the bottom of the social pyramid of Russia were the mostly illiterate, up to the emancipation of serfs in 1861/66, often unfree peasants, whose deep faith allowed them to endure their oppression and the regular famines, such as that of 1891/92, partly caused by low investments and lack of modern technology in the agriculture, which were were a consequence of the *obshchina* system, i.e., the small ratio of privately to collectively owned land. At the top was the tsar, who from the view of most peasants had a religious authority that detached him from the aristocracy and for whom many maintained a strong affection. (Despite his vulgarity, Grigori Rasputin was a symbol of a living connection between the peasants and the monarch that bypassed the aristocratic and wealthy circles.) Of course there was a clergy and civil servants, as well as petty bourgeois, and there was a landed aristocracy, who was deeply rooted in military virtues. At the same time, the Russian aristocracy could afford an intellectual development denied to the other classes and even more indispensable to it since it lacked the outlet of a political activity in a parliament. Inevitably, such an intellectual growth led to self-doubts regarding the whole structure of Russian society and one's own position in it. But what is missing up to the late nineteenth century is a wealthy and educated upper bourgeoisie in the Western sense. One cause of the late development of a Russian bourgeoisie was that the deep Christian sensibility of the Russians revolted against the integration of the universalized rational egoism that has brought forth modern capitalism.

Piotr Chaadayev is crucial in the history of Russian thought because he anticipates both the Westernizers and the Slavophiles, the two main schools of thought that emerged in the nineteenth century, both of which were in opposition to the conservative forces of the empire. In the late 1820s, he wrote in French the *Lettres sur la philosophie de l'histoire* (*Letters on the philosophy of history*), the first of which was published in 1836 in Russian translation in a journal. As much as this first letter gives a bleak vision of Russia and does not hide at all the hostility

against serfdom and the Orthodox Church, Chaadayev in his letters utters great hopes with regard to the future development of Russia—hopes that could inspire the Slavophiles. There is no way to treat here the intricate discussions between the two schools of thought, but three points are relevant for our topic. First, it is worth remarking that the main issue of Russian philosophy in the nineteenth century consists in determining Russia's position in the world—something that cannot be said of any other national philosophy. The quest for one's identity as well as the struggle for recognition by the West are the driving forces of Russia's intellectual life. Second, this reflection on their own culture brought forth Russia's most lasting contribution to world culture—its nineteenth-century literature. The intellectual discussions in the great Russian novels are often addressing, beside the ever-present topic of the Russian identity, deeper philosophical issues than the contemporary philosophical texts. Thirdly, the existential seriousness and sincerity of the Russians gave them, despite all their suffering caused by the situation of their culture, at the same time a sense of superiority, which was sharpened by their acute perception of the weaknesses and hypocrisies of the West.

Of course this sense of moral and spiritual superiority is not in itself revolutionary. To get to a real revolution, something had to be added to the discontent with one's own culture and the rejection of liberalism as an alternative to tsarism. The latter alternative never became palatable to larger strata because in Russia it never received the religious or metaphysical justification that the Russian culture searched for and which in Germany Hegel had bestowed on the idea of a rational state based on the separation of powers and the respect of universal rights. The central issue became what to do, что делать—to quote the title of Nikolay Chernyshevsky's famous novel, which presented the character Rakhmetov as the model for the new professional revolutionaries. One of the most terrifying figures among the Russian nihilists was Sergey Nechayev, on whom Pyotr Verchovensky in Dostoyevsky's *Demons* is somehow modeled. Nechayev's *Catechism of a Revolutionary* (*Катехизис революционера*), which may have been composed with the help of his friend Mikhail Bakunin, is one of the most impressive monuments of hatred in human history.⁶

Nechayev was certainly a pathological extremist, even if several of the Socialist Revolutionaries and some of the later Soviet leaders, particularly of the Cheka, did not think unlike he did. Among the nineteenth-century revolutionaries, Pyotr Tkachev anticipates much more of the Bolshevik mindset, particularly thanks to his rejection of Bakunin's anarchism and his commitment to the idea of a revolu-

⁶ The Russian original can be found in Лурье 2001, 104–109, an English translation in Pomper 1979, 90–95.

tionary vanguard. He considered the absence of a strong bourgeoisie a factor favoring the revolution and connected socialism to the traditional *obshchina*. Georgi Plekhanov, on the other hand, the first Russian Marxist in the strict sense of the word, insisted on the necessity first of a bourgeois revolution before later a socialist one could follow. He disliked the sentimental ideas of the narodniks, who saw in the peasant community the true strength of Russia, but whose program of ‘going to the people’ (хождение в народ) had proven largely ineffective, since the religious and monarchist peasants mistrusted and resented the often condescending attitude of the mostly wealthy persons who visited and tried to indoctrinate them while pretending to learn their customs. Since the number of workers had increased from 1865 to 1898 (from 380,000 to 3 million), Plekhanov could hope that this would be the social basis for a later socialist revolution. But he was adamantly opposed to the October revolution, which in his eyes came far too early after the February revolution and which ended the war effort that Plekhanov strongly supported.

4 Why Did the Soviet Revolution Succeed?

The causes for the success of the February and October revolutions were many:⁷ I mention only the irreparable split in the Russian society discussed above; the increasing alienation of the aristocracy, which had been its traditional support, from the monarchy; the intransigence of the tsarist regime (particularly after the murder of Alexander II, the most reform-minded Russian tsar since Peter the Great);⁸ a repression that did not seem to leave any hope for reform; and the preparedness of the revolutionaries to kill and to die. In the chapter ‘Du socialisme au terrorisme’ of his prophetic book of 1886, Anatol Leroy-Beaulieu asks how people who had been inspired by the Christian martyrs could in the course of one generation be transformed into assassins, and his answer is: “Cette brusque metamor-

7 See the reflection on general conditions of revolutions instantiated in the Russian case in Tilly (1993, 215): “In general three further circumstances promote the proximate conditions for revolutionary situations: increasing discrepancies between what rulers demand of their best-organized subjects and their own capacity to compel compliance; attacks on major identities and their perquisites within the subject population; diminution of rulers’ power in the presence of well-organized competitors.”

8 I do not know how to answer the question of whether Russia could have become a liberal state if Alexander II had not been murdered (as I also cannot answer the question of whether a longer life of Lenin would have softened the Soviet regime). The truth conditions of counterfactuals seem to presuppose the existence of laws, and in our case we do not yet know them.

phose a été accomplie par l'arrestation, par la deportation de la plupart des propagandistes." (1893[1886], 559)⁹ Paradoxically also the emancipation of the serfs, which was not sufficient to grant the majority a decent livelihood, transformed many of them into industrial proletarians, more malleable by revolutionary propaganda, and increased the revolutionary spirit. But as the Russo-Japanese War triggered the 1905 Russian Revolution, so the First World War ignited the February and the October Revolution. The senseless killing alienated finally even the peasants, who had been transformed into cannon-fodder, from their tsar, and the refusal of the liberal government to end the war and accept a federal constitution and a land reform played a crucial role in its delegitimation. The introduction of administrative courts by Alexander Kerensky on May 31, 1917 was an important step toward the separation of political powers—but the peasants dying in the trenches had more urgent problems, and the new government proved unable to halt the general collapse. If there was a stroke of genius in Lenin, it was certainly his decision to search, against all nationalistic opposition, a separate peace with the Central Powers in order to focus on domestic tasks. Given the fact that the Russian plan to divert the attention from the internal problems by a war in the Far East had backfired so strongly in 1905, one can only be amazed at the stupidity with which the government rushed into the next war, for which it was no more prepared than it was for the earlier one. Despite the enormous amount of natural resources and its huge population with an extraordinary capacity for suffering, Russia still lacked the industrial basis necessary for a modern war. The decline of the authority of the state is a further factor that facilitates a revolution, and the weakness of the empire that had begun to show itself already with the Crimean War raised the courage to overthrow the government.

Needless to say, a revolutionary situation does not determine as such who will get the power. History is so full of contingencies that it is absurd to claim that the victory of the Bolsheviks in October 1917 and later in the Civil War was 'necessary'. But it is astonishing how quickly the Bolsheviks reorganized themselves after their several defeats in the war, while for the Whites defeats were mostly final. The horrors of the Civil War, which threatened the territorial integrity of the country through the various intervening countries, the lack of coordina-

⁹ Leroy-Beaulieu's protest against the brutality of Russian repression is reminiscent of the famous March 14th (24th) 1699 letter by Leibniz to the Amsterdam Mayor and Russia expert Nicolaes Witsen after Peter the Great's massacre of the streltsys. "Ce que je crains est que tant de supplices bien loin d'étouffer les animosités ne les aigrissent avec une manière de contagion." At the same he utters the hope that Peter's heir will continue "de civilizer la nation"—which still looks a bit like Scythia (Guerrier 1873, 42f.). I am not sure that Leibniz was reassured by Witsen's remark that the tsar would take care also of the relatives of the streltsys by banning them to Siberia (44f.).

tion among the various White generals, as well as the fact that some of the White leaders were even more pathological than the Red ones (suffice it to mention Roman von Ungern-Sternberg), contribute to explaining the Bolshevik victory in the Civil War and the final acquiescence of the Russian population under Soviet rule, which at least brought stability and quickly managed to regain most of the territories lost after the revolution (Finland, the Baltic republics, and Poland being the most important exceptions).

Russia lacked experience with the long process of coming to an agreement by democratic bargaining and the capacity to compromise, without which a system based on the separation of powers cannot function. In the *zemstvos*, introduced in 1864, 74% had been nobles; the first two State Dumas, elected in 1906 and 1907, were extremely short-lived, and the Third Duma was elected on the basis of a new electoral law passed in violation of the 1905 constitution. All this did not increase trust in parliamentarism. The contempt for democratic procedures became obvious when the Bolsheviks dissolved the Constituent Assembly elected in November 1917 in the first free election in Russian history, when, unlike the Nazis in the last free German elections, they received only less than a quarter of the votes; the abrogation of the multi-party system followed already in summer 1918. The Russian constitution of 1918 explicitly deprived the class enemies of all political rights (art. 65). Clearly, this was not a dictatorship by the proletariat, but at least it claimed to be a dictatorship for the proletariat; and probably most Bolsheviks sincerely believed that they were the best advocates of the proletariat's interests. But the brutality with which the Kronstadt rebellion was crushed proves that the Bolsheviks early on suppressed even the possibility of a Soviet democracy.

The first Soviet constitution of 1923/24 did not offer any basic rights—which the Russian Constitution of 1906 had granted in Chapter Eight (for example, the right to travel abroad in art. 76). The 1936 constitution lists in Chapter Ten fundamental rights and duties of citizens, including several rights to benefits, which had been alien to the 1906 constitution; but the rights to freedom from interference had hardly any social reality (something true of much of Soviet law, which often yielded to informal political pressure). The 1923/24 constitution concentrated political power in the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee, which combined legislative and executive powers (art. 29), and did not recognize a true independence of the judiciary (art. 43–48). Against Stalin's opposition, Lenin, fulfilling one of his early promises, implemented some form of federalism within the Soviet Union, which became even a two-tiered federal state, since the largest republic, Russia, was itself a federal state; he accepted the right of the republics to leave the Union (declaration and art. 4). This right continued through the 1936 constitution (art. 17) up to the last Soviet constitution of 1977, where it is stated in art. 72, and it played an inspiring role in the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Socialization of the means of production belonged from the beginning to the Bolshevik program. The collectivization of the economy during the Civil War could be justified with analogous examples in war situations; Lenin admired Germany's 'state capitalism' in the First World War. Adopting it and accelerating its adoption by all dictatorial methods even more than Peter the Great accelerated the adoption of Western culture by barbarian Russia, without shrinking back from barbaric methods of struggle against barbarism—this Lenin declared in his 1918 essay '*Left-wing' childishness and the petty-bourgeois mentality* (*О 'левом' ребячестве и о мелкобуржуазности*) as his aim (1937, IV 276).¹⁰ One has to recognize that he kept his word, including the last promise. Lenin's eminent practical sense led him, however, to introduce the New Economic Policy in 1921, which was then replaced by the five-year plans (*пятiletки*) under Stalin. They managed to achieve a rapid industrialization of the country and, after victory in World War II, when the Nazi aggression unleashed even more patriotism than during the Civil War, the Soviet Union expanded its political power over the planet in a way never reached by the tsars and was awarded with the status of one of only two superpowers.

It seems to me that the fact that the political system created by the Bolsheviks could last up to 1991 and enjoy sincere enthusiasm from many Russians cannot be explained without taking into consideration its novel ideology, for coercion and terror alone cannot hold a polity together for very long. The new worldview offered a synthesis of many expectations that had been built up in the nineteenth century. People live not from bread alone, and the desire to overcome the oscillation between self-contempt and compensatory megalomania that characterized so much of the nineteenth-century intelligentsia, was an incentive at least as powerful as the wish for a more advanced form of production and more justice. It was so powerful that many were willing and able to endure the terrible deprivations that came with the civil war and the Second World War, supported by the sincere belief that Russia now had become the political vanguard of the whole world.

Bolshevism was based on a Western ideology, Marxism, and so it could be considered as belonging to the family of the Westernizers. Its anti-religious stance, its commitment to 'scientific materialism', its claim to have found the laws of economy and human history, as well as the orientation toward the liberation of the whole of humankind were all factors pointing to modernization. Inspiring was the feeling that reality had to be remade by the subject—but unlike in the Western ideal of the self-made man not by the individual but the collective. This points to the other side of Bolshevism: It seemed to prove through its success that the na-

¹⁰ "[...] не останавливаясь перед варварскими средствами борьбы против варварства" ("not shrinking back from barbaric methods of struggle against barbarism").

tions of the Soviet Union were destined to show the light to the rest of the world. The continuity with traditional forms of repression and the etatist tradition was at least not a cultural shock and reminded people of familiar experiences, now, however, with the hope of standing on the side of the hangman and not on that of the victim. In his above-mentioned essay, Lenin justified the necessity of the concentration of power in the hands of the political leaders of the workers by averring that, thanks to the strength of the political power of the Russian workers, the country is now ahead of all other countries, even if with regard to the level of its culture and its material production, it lags behind even the most retrograde Western European country (IV 280). By such claims, the Bolsheviks somehow satisfied the national pride of the Slavophiles, even if only Stalin in his famous toast to the Russian people at the reception in honor of Red Army Commanders on May 24th of 1945 explicitly recognized the outstanding nature of the Russian nation among all Soviet peoples. By connecting the collectivization in kolkhozes and increasingly in sovkhoses to the tradition of the *obshchina*, continuity with the tradition was suggested—and one has sarcastically argued that even a new form of serfdom was introduced since children born in kolkhozes needed special permission to leave them and seek work elsewhere. Against Marx's own anti-agrarian beliefs the first socialist state pretended to be a state of workers and peasants, symbolized by hammer and sickle (even if the peasants continued to be exploited economically).

The centralization of power in Stalin's hand in the 1930s created a monocratic equivalent to tsardom, and the exposition of the corpses of the two leaders somehow revived the cult of icons and relics. Psychologically, the task of working together toward world revolution and, after the demise of Trotsky (who was a military, not a political genius) and the rise of Stalin, of constructing the first socialist country addressed deep religious needs, such as the desire to sacrifice oneself for a greater cause, a desire that could no longer be sated by traditional forms of religiosity, which the elites considered more and more intellectually dishonest. Already in an essay of 1908, Berdyaev understood very well the transformation of religious energies that was occurring in the psychology of the revolutionaries (1908/1910, esp. 60). Paradoxically one could say that only a revolution with a utopian dimension could work in a country with such a strong religious tradition. A more sober vision, such as that of a transition into a liberal state, was nothing less than—a utopia in a country with strong utopian needs.

It cannot be my task to trace here the power struggles that led to Stalin's totalitarian rule with the Great Purge, the ossification of the system, and the end of

the Soviet Union in 1991.¹¹ The only issue I want still to mention is the cultural development of the Soviet Union. What distinguishes most strikingly the Soviet from the Nazi revolution is that for around a decade the Soviet Union managed to bring forth extraordinary achievements in the arts. It is doubtless true that the Soviet system early on exiled many great artists and intellectuals and under Stalin killed or drove to suicide many others. Still, the enthusiasm for the new revolution inspired some exceptional artists, something that holds only to a very limited degree for National Socialism. The unfolding of the arts in the first Soviet decennium was protected by Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first Commissar of Education, and a man of taste, but with the rise of Stalin and Andrei Zhdanov the avant-garde was annihilated. It is the Soviet film where I see the greatest artistic originality of the new system, but doubtless Vladimir Mayakovsky, Yevgeny Zamyatin, Mikhail Bulgakov, and Boris Pasternak were first-rate writers.¹²

5 Ends, Means, and Side Effects of the Soviet Revolution

Trying to evaluate a complex historical phenomenon could appear absurd; for only the actions of individual agents seem subject to moral judgment. Certainly nobody is responsible for unforeseeable consequences; therefore, even if one comes to a negative evaluation of the Soviet Revolution, this does not entail that all persons who supported it acted wrongly. Such a judgment depends on the choices one makes and these on the alternatives that exist; and if someone falls into the maelstrom of a revolution, the alternatives are dramatically diminished. A morally plausible one, emigration, for example, was not open to many. But even if all this is undeniable, we must recognize that human actions are not ends in themselves but aim at bringing about certain states of affairs; and that the value of an action has much to do with the value of the state it aims at. So the first question we have to ask is: What was the Soviet Revolution trying to bring about? The end alone, however, does never justify all requisite means, for they may violate goods of a higher value than those they help bring about. The second question, therefore, is: What about the moral nature of the means used? Third, even if the side-effects of an event could not be foreseen by the agents, the moral relevance of historiography consists in the fact that later generations can observe

¹¹ A good overview can be found in Crozier 1999.

¹² On Russian and Soviet culture see Hösle 2017.

these unintended consequences and transform them from unforeseeable to foreseeable ones; without necessarily condemning the agents of the earlier time, we must now recognize that we have to avoid situations that are likely to produce such consequences.

To start with the goal, it was hardly immoral from the outset. Who can object to the abolition of the exploitation of man by man, declared as the paramount objective in art. 3 of the Russian constitution of 1918? Indeed, the commitment to universalist moral ideals and to some form of international solidarity (which was not incompatible with imperialist expansion, inspired by and at the same time conflicting with the universalist ideas) distinguishes the Soviet Revolution from the legal revolution of National Socialism, which furthermore did not have the excuse of a brutally repressive opponent, against whom the Bolsheviks had fought up to February 1917. There is a different spirit in both revolutions, which manifests itself at various levels. Among the Nazi leaders, there was not one figure who was morally attractive, while among the old Bolsheviks there were some people with some decency and even taste. Lunacharsky belongs definitely to another moral category than Joseph Goebbels—while I would deny this in the cases of Heinrich Himmler and Genrikh Yagoda or Reinhard Heydrich and Nikolai Yezhov. Among the convinced followers, there were in both systems people with a great capacity to self-sacrifice, but the willingness to kill was directed in the Soviet system mainly toward those who were perceived as threats to the system. The extermination of people based on their race alone is something limited to Germany, even if the Soviet phantasy in discovering putative enemies achieved comparable results concerning the number of victims, and putative enemies were also searched for according to ethnic criteria. Various population transfers were in the end genocides, even if they were not planned as explicit genocides. Despite the horrors of Stalinism, with a terror probably more indiscriminate than in Germany, the brutality of the Soviet Union diminished considerably with Nikita Khrushchev, whose rule was more authoritarian than totalitarian; and with Mikhail Gorbachev a peaceful transition became possible, which could not have been expected from a nationalist socialist system. The basic honesty of Gorbachev, as of many other less prominent Soviet citizens, was not incompatible with the Soviet system, even with positions of high power.

The most important step in the overcoming of the exploitation of man by man was supposed to be socialism. While a means to the first goal, socialism is so close to the ultimate end that it can be dealt with together with it. Here the moral evidence is not so obvious. First of all, it is not clear at all why in a planned economy the abolition of the exploitation of man by man is more likely to occur than in a market economy. This is true even if the planned economy were based on democratic processes, parliamentary or direct ones, which was not the

case in the Soviet Union; for the minority that is overruled has fewer rights in a planned than in a market economy, where each individual has a certain chance to have her needs satisfied by satisfying the needs of someone else. History has now proven what theoretical reflections had shown already in advance, namely, that a planned economy leads much more rarely to an equilibrium between supply and demand than a market economy, for it is far less flexible and there is no reason to assume that the bureaucracy knows people's needs better than they themselves do. The discrediting of the market economy was widespread also among Western intellectuals, who liked to enjoy the benefits of capitalism but console themselves concerning its contradictions by the thought that somewhere else an alternative to capitalism was being built (fortunately not by themselves). One of the roots of this rejection was the difficulty to understand that social systems may have positive outcomes even if nobody intended them as such (see Hösle 2011).

The Soviet Union's lagging behind the West in the production of consumption goods is well known. But one could argue that the forced industrialization under Stalin from the beginning very deliberately did not emphasize satisfying the needs of the consumer, but wanted to build up a heavy industry comparable to those of the Western countries. Here successes were indeed achieved:

“In 1913 the Tsarist Empire, with 9.4 per cent of the world's population, produced 6 per cent of the world's total of ‘national income’ and 3.6 per cent of its industrial output. In 1986 the U.S.S.R., with less than 6 per cent of the global population produced 14 per cent of the globe's ‘national income’ and 14.6 per cent of its industrial output.” (Hobsbawm 1996, 385)

Comparable successes were missing in the agricultural sector, however, and one might ask whether the quick industrialization did not serve mainly the desire for prestige of the ruler. Still, one can argue that the industrialization proved a blessing when Germany attacked the country, since it allowed the Soviet Union to defeat the aggressor. While this claim is far from absurd, one may of course object that the rise of fascism in Europe was facilitated by the Soviet Revolution. As long as such a statement is not used to excuse fascism, it is plausible. But this does not alter the fact that given the existence of hostile powers, industrialization was necessary, if one wanted to avoid the subjection of one's country.¹³ Whether the industrialization would have occurred with the same speed if the October revolution had not followed the February revolution, I am unable to assess.

But even if the transformation of the Soviet Union into an industrial state and the defeat of Germany succeeded and were titles of pride for most Soviet citizens,

¹³ Stone rightly insists on the necessity to consider the international context in which the three great revolutions occurred: Stone 2014, XI.

the question remains: at what price?¹⁴ Not only individual rights to property and liberty were violated to an enormous degree, the number of human lives lost in the Civil War, the Holodomor (the Ukrainian terror-famine), and then under Stalin's state terrorism is huge—in the latter alone probably between ten and twenty million lives (Hobsbawm 1996, 393). Again, one might argue that the dead of the civil war were not due so much to the Bolsheviks as to the insurgents; for even a philosopher as generally opposed to the legitimacy of revolutions as Kant insisted that once a revolutionary government was in place it had to be respected.¹⁵ Whatever the truth of this claim (one can argue that the Russians' revolt against the Bolsheviks was morally nobler than the Germans' acquiescence to their dictatorship), it is psychologically natural that people follow the example they are given; and that after the dismissal of the Constituent Assembly uprisings occurred can hardly come as surprise. Revolutions based on radical changes in the value system are almost always bloody—think of the English Revolution (with most victims in Ireland) and of the French revolution. The American Revolution is indeed an exception, due mainly to three factors. First, it was a territory-, not interest-based conflict, which ended with the successful secession. Second, the American Framers focused a great amount of intellectual power on conceiving a constitution that could limit the abuse of power. The obsession with socialism, on the other hand, led already Marx, and even more the Bolsheviks, to neglect reflecting on a reasonable distribution of power. After all, why should one care if socialism will abolish all exploitation of humans by humans? Third, the desire to overcome social inequality doubtless increased the amount of violence necessary for the purpose, while the American continent offered an expansion westward, in which not redistribution but one's own work would overcome poverty.¹⁶

Concerning the question of whether the Soviet Revolution may be held responsible for Stalin's rise, the answer is difficult. There is little doubt that Stalin's monocratic system was not envisaged by the Bolsheviks but there is no way to deny that the dictatorship of one party based on the sovereign contempt for mechanisms of separation of powers opened up the possibility and, given human na-

¹⁴ Already Leroy-Beaulieu foresaw that a Russian revolution, which he considered likely, would be the greatest event since the French revolution and of an astonishing originality, social rather than political, and deeply imbued with the Slavic spirit. "Mais cela a quel prix? Avec quels sacrifices pour la science et la civilisation?" (1893[1889], 625)

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals, Doctrine of Right*, §49, General Remark A.

¹⁶ This is the central thesis of Hannah Arendt (1963), which opposed the 'good' American Revolution to the bad ones driven by the social question: "The transformation of the Rights of Man into the Rights of Sans-Culottes was the turning point not only of the French Revolution but of all revolutions that were to follow." (55)

ture, even the likelihood of a monocratic stage that promised to put an end to all the conflicts that had plagued the immediate revolutionary situation. One of the many problems that Lenin left his country was the lack of a clear succession regulation, and this lack, as well as the recent memories of the orgies of violence in the Great War and the civil war, inevitably increased the risk of a bloody power struggle. It was at least a natural side effect. An ideology that delegates to history the ultimate decision on right and wrong should accept its responsibility for history. An intentionalist ethics, on the other hand, should point to the fact that the horrors, while not foreseen, were foreseeable and were not foreseen because one did not want to curb one's desire for power. In the case of the Holodomor, the category of recklessness captures best the moral nature of the deeds. But the legal murders of the Great Purge were obviously deliberate—they explicitly aimed at killing the indicted people.

Despite the differences in the initial goal, it seems therefore futile to me to deny the analogies between National Socialism and Stalinism pointed out by Arendt. The fact that the implementation of opposite goals could lead to political systems that were quite similar in their deadly results is one of the most important lessons of the history of the twentieth century. It proves that ends do not matter that much, if people feel entitled by them to use whatever means they want—for since people in revolutionary situations do not agree on ends, it is natural to come to the conclusion that the elimination of one's opponents is the best way to accelerate the achievement of one's ends. Ultimately this doctrine is a radicalized form of consequentialism, which completely abstracts from the intrinsic value of an action, but looks only at the consequences—or better: at the purported consequences. In one of the best literary works on the Bolshevik mindset, *Sonnenfinsternis (Darkness at Noon)*, Arthur Koestler, who had been himself a dedicated communist for several years, has represented very well this willingness to sacrifice any individual for the purposes of the collective in the discussion between Rubashov and his old friend and interrogator Ivanov at the end of the second part, a willingness compared with the justification of vivisection of animals, even if it is now the social body of humanity that is flayed. Ivanov is inspired by the metaphor and the task to sew a new skin on the social body (1961[1940], 139f.). Koestler succeeds in depicting his caring camaraderie not without some admiration, while he despises Gletkin, who represents the new generation of Bolsheviks under the new monocrat. In him, the commitment to the successful industrialization has extinguished all feelings of human solidarity and replaced them with the willingness to use not only violence but also all forms of manipulation. After Gletkin has managed to have Ivanov shot, Rubashov submits to him, in the sincere desire to serve the party by accusing and sacrificing himself on the altar of history.

What does ethics say to the idea that a noble end justifies the means? The answer can only be that the end must be realizable with great probability and its intrinsic value clearly outweigh the negative value of the means applied (see Hösle 2004, 138ff.). But human lives are of greater value than the increase of production; and furthermore there is, and there was already at the beginning of the twentieth century, much evidence that the increase of productivity is stronger in a market society. Its abolition by monstrous crimes had thus no moral justification, and the collapse of the Soviet Union was ultimately based on the acknowledgment that the system of planned economy had lost the race to market economy concerning the raising of the standard of living as well as artistic and scientific creativity. While it is true that the experience of navigating through the ocean of Soviet totalitarianism granted some people a moral and intellectual depth hardly found in consumerist societies,¹⁷ among the values widely destroyed by the system were also virtues like courage and sincerity. Bulgakov's Pilate recognizes cowardice as one of the worst vices.¹⁸ On it alone can totalitarianism thrive.

From what I have said it is clear that the Soviet Revolution does not fit into a teleological construction of human history. It did not extend the reach of human freedom but produced a hideous totalitarian system—which, however, played an important role in defeating an even more gruesome one, which explains its attractiveness for some Western intellectuals. The ideal of social justice for the poorer classes was far better achieved by the Western welfare state. And yet there are two aspects that have to be acknowledged. The extension from negative to positive rights was an important achievement of the twentieth century. The late Soviet Union managed to implement many social rights in a way completely unknown to earlier phases of Russian history, and probably the threat of a social revolution contributed to their quick expansion in the West (think also of the evolution of international labor law). No less relevant was the idea of international solidarity. We are still far from having implemented it in powerful institutions, but one could see in the Bretton Woods system and in the WTO global organizations with increasing commitment to global welfare. For they foster development and global trade as forces able to diminish global poverty. They are a far cry from the self-understanding of the international workers' movement, but if the above-mentioned institutions succeed in overcoming absolute poverty, they may at such time recognize themselves as the true and efficient heirs of the universalist commitment of Marxism. Second, the reason why the Soviet Revolution cannot

¹⁷ See Пастернак 1959, 185/Pasternak 1958, 182 (VI 4): “[...] in these five or ten years we have experienced more than other people do in a century.”

¹⁸ Булгаков 2008, 590/Bulgakov 1997, 319 (ch. 26).

simply be considered an absurd mistake was its extraordinary attractiveness for Third World countries, particularly in Asia. Christopher Reed notes two related contradictions: “While universally based on a ‘proletarian’ ideology it has, where it has come to power, relied heavily on peasants and peasant-based revolutions. [...] Secondly, [...] communism was, almost everywhere, faced with pre-capitalist problems of cultural, political and economic ‘backwardness’ [...]” (1996, 290) The reason for these contradictions is relatively simple: When the liberal way of modernization is a viable and generally understood alternative, people usually prefer it, because there is far less risk of violent eruptions. Where this was not the case and the urge for modernization arose, Marxism-Leninism up to 1989 offered a plausible ideological model of how to get there. It appealed to pre-modern concepts of justice and at the same proposed a philosophy of history that permitted the less-developed countries to feel themselves superior to the West, whose wealth and power they viewed with aversion. For it is much easier to motivate people to modernize if one can promise them that they will not simply catch up with other nations but surpass them by achieving a new level of historical development. While Marxist philosophy of history is wrong in its subordination of liberalism to socialism, a more complex philosophy of history has to recognize the enormous importance of the Marxist philosophy of history as a tool of modernization that enthused and motivated people to great sacrifices, some of which led to admirable results. The abuse of philosophy of history by Marxism should not lead to a generic rejection of the discipline, which remains essential in order to make sense of the whole of human experience and also to guide our future development.

The first country that went the path described by Reed was Russia. I have tried to illustrate that in the Russian case the Bolshevik ideology could be experienced as a liberation from the contradictions that had beset the Russian national consciousness in the nineteenth century. Where does Russia stand now after the loss of its ideology? Have Westernizers, Slavophiles, and persons interested only in maintaining the power distribution of the status quo reappeared in a new form? How will this renewed conflict end in the twenty-first century? I only know that the evaporation of the Soviet Union and the failure of post-1991 Russia to become a normal Western country have raised the intensity of the identity search of the Russians to a new pitch; this does not bode well for the political future. For Russia is as far today as it was hundred years ago from a moral capitalism. The communist experiment has not led to a taming of egoism, which expressed itself in a more brutal form when the religious residuum of Communism vanished; and the revived Russian Orthodox Church does not even understand the necessity of a modern social ethics and the moral arguments for a constitution based on the separation of powers. The humiliation accompanying the collapse of the Soviet Union has

not been digested, and the category of the near abroad (ближнее зарубежье) is not easily made compatible with contemporary international law. As long as these problems continue, the long shadow of the Soviet Revolution will stay with us.

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