



The Addiction of Russian Intellectuals to Historicism (Harvard 1962)

This PDF is one of a series designed to assist scholars in their research on Isaiah Berlin, and the subjects in which he was interested.

The series will make digitally available both selected published items and edited transcripts of unpublished material.

Transcripts of extempore talks (such as this one) have been edited by Henry Hardy to eliminate their most obvious linguistic and stylistic flaws, and some references are provided, but no systematic attempt has been made to bring these texts fully up to the standard required for conventional publication. The aim is only to make them available in a reader-friendly form.

The PDF is posted by the Isaiah Berlin Legacy Fellow at Wolfson College, with the support of the Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust.

All enquiries, including those concerning rights, should be directed to the Legacy Fellow at berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk

The Addiction of Russian Intellectuals to Historicism

Isaiah Berlin spoke on this subject on numerous occasions, four of which have yielded a text. On 12 December 1962 the Russian Research Center at Harvard hosted a talk and discussion on ‘The Addiction of Russian Intellectuals to Historicism’, transcribed below (no recording survives). ‘The Russian Preoccupation with Historicism’, transcribed [here](#), was a lecture given and recorded at the University of Sussex in 1967. The recording, the original of which is held by the University of Sussex Library, may be heard [here](#). Next, Berlin delivered the second Dal Grauer Memorial Lecture, ‘The Russians’ Obsession with History and Historicism’, at Totem Park, University of British Columbia, on 2 March 1971, and again a [recording](#) is available. Finally, there was a BBC talk, recorded on 14 December 1973, transmitted on Radio 3 on 24 July 1974 (and repeated on 17 March 1975), and on 29 October 1975 by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation as ‘The Russian Obsession with History’: a transcript is [here](#), and a recording (the clearest of the three that survive) may be heard [here](#). None of these versions was published by Berlin, though a very short extract from the BBC talk appeared under the subheading ‘History’ in ‘Out of the Year’, *Listener*, 19 and 26 December 1974, 830.¹

THE RUSSIAN INTELLIGENTSIA, or its leaders in the nineteenth century – men whose ideas contributed vastly to making the Russian Revolution what it was – were not principally interested in history as historians are interested in it, or as ordinary students of it are; what absorbed their attention was the problem

¹ ‘Sir Isaiah Berlin spoke of the concern for “History” manifested by nineteenth-century and twentieth-century Russians – and, comparably, by developing nations in Asia and Africa: “There obviously is some deep connection between being technologically inferior and looking to history to see what one can do. In some way, history offers a prop. It offers some kind of encouragement to proceed in a certain direction, which successful societies don’t feel because they can simply ask themselves what is the rational thing to do, without particularly bothering about alleged patterns to which they look as some kind of salvation.”’

of laws of history, patterns of history – historicism, that is to say – for they looked to history more or less as a substitute for metaphysics or religion. They looked to history for a theodicy, for a justification of their own lives, and those of mankind at large, and they hoped to find in it a pattern which they might follow – rules, goals, ways of life, answers to the torturing questions, social and personal, with which they were afflicted.

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

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

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

As to the lack of original thought in modern Russia, this is doubtless in part due to the fact that there was no solid, continuous intellectual tradition in Russia before Peter, no tradition either of scholarship or of logical argument or of rational metaphysics in the

Russian Church, so far as I know: holy living, martyrdom, spiritual experience, a great hierarchical Church, battles between order and antinomian deviation, but nothing like the scholastic disciplines of the West, nor a secular Renaissance, nor a Reformation. I shall not enlarge on this, but it is a powerful factor in the situation which arose after Peter the Great sent his young men to Europe; when Western ideas did begin to enter en masse into the Russian Empire, they were entering a virtual vacuum in which they encountered no counteracting ideas. In the West, one idea collides with another, like the atoms of Epicurus; there is constant interaction, and therefore no single idea or thesis or doctrine has a free run all to itself. Ideas run up against other ideas, destroy, modify, combine with one another, give birth to unintended and unpredicted consequences, and so constitute what is called a climate of opinion, and it is very difficult for any set of ideas to achieve monopoly. Whereas in Russia, simply because there were few counteracting ideas, seeds were wafted across from the Western world by all kinds of peculiar routes, fell on extremely fresh and receptive soil, and swiftly grew to enormous proportions. That is why, from early Romantic ideas to Marxism, Darwinism and beyond, Western ideas developed so powerfully in Russian conditions, and came to be so deeply and passionately believed, with a naivety and limitless dedication which transformed them. Nothing, perhaps, transforms ideas so much as being taken seriously. And Western ideas were accepted seriously in Russia with a strength just bordering on fanaticism, which even their authors in the West, or at any rate their later followers, seldom reached.

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

hatred of the West: where did such secular faith reach comparable peaks?

This liability to be overcome by ideas was noted quite early in Russian history. Joseph de Maistre, the Sardinian agent in Petersburg from the beginning of the century until 1817, comments in his interesting notes on Russia on the fact that nobody is so susceptible to ideas as the Russians. He, of course, is a passionate right-wing Catholic publicist, trying to warn people about the effects of radicalism, liberalism, natural science, utilitarianism, scepticism and other diseases which have ravaged mankind since the eighteenth century. In the course of these notes, he says to one of his noble Russian friends that in the West there are two great anchors upon which society is founded. One is the Roman Church, the other is slavery. Only when the Church became so secure and respected and authoritative that it penetrated to every department of thought and action in Europe, and became the intellectual, moral, and spiritual centre of European life, was it able to abolish serfdom, which was a humane and Christian act which it had always sought to perform, but could not while society was in a state of insecurity and potential disintegration. In Russia the Church is not respected; the priests are ignorant and despised; the bishops and metropolitans are not held in sufficient public respect; hence it is impossible to let the Russian state rest on clerical foundations, because the Church lacks all traditional and all intellectual virtues, and indeed all social and public authority. Therefore, he says to Alexander and his other Russian correspondents, do not abolish serfdom. If you do, Russian society will disintegrate. It will disintegrate because Russians are oversusceptible to alien ideas, since they have very few of their own. He goes on to say that Russians, late arrivals in the Western world, overestimate the value of ideas from the West, so that a few revolutionary hotheads, aided by some university rebels ('quelque Pugatscheff d'une université'),² plus a few dissident leaders, are

² 'Some university Pugachev'. Joseph de Maistre, *Quatre chapitres sur la Russie*, chapter 1: *Oeuvres complètes de J. de Maistre* (Lyon/Paris, 1884–7), viii 291.

enough, if they are sufficiently fanatical and sufficiently steeped in subversive ideas from the West, to overturn the entire state. ‘Soon you will find that your country will pass from barbarism to anarchy with no intermediate civilised interval.’³ Therefore, he advises, retard science, retard knowledge, do not allow all these German scientists and literary men to come. These people come only because they are refugees. Refugees are people who have not made the grade in their own countries. That is why they wander. Decent people do not leave their families and their native soil. They work peacefully for their kings and governments. All the German Protestants and French Jacobins are essentially subversives, people who cannot but bore from within. If you allow too many into Russia, as you appear to be doing, and, moreover, if you start all these universities, encourage the sciences, encourage the arts, you will find that the Russians will take to all this much too eagerly. It will be like a heady wine to men not used to it, and will cause terrible inebriation, violence, chaos, and this will mean the end and ruin of your entire system.

Alexander I did not follow Maistre’s advice; he made a few unconvincing efforts to check enlightenment. Nicholas I retarded education and tried to insulate Russia intellectually, both after the

Emel’yan Ivanovich Pugachev (c.1742–1775) was the leader of a peasant and Cossack rebellion crushed in the reign of Catherine the Great.

³ The transcript reads ‘despotism’, not ‘anarchy’, but this must be a mistake, whether by Berlin or the stenographer. Maistre writes (ibid.) about what will happen if the serfs are liberated: ‘sans préparation, ils passeront infailliblement et brusquement de la superstition à l’athésisme, et d’une obéissance passive à une activité effrénée’. Berlin quotes this passage in ‘Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism’, translating it thus: ‘without preparation, they will infallibly and suddenly pass from superstition to atheism, from passive obedience to unbridled activity’ (CTH2 156). And in his lecture on Maistre in *Freedom and Its Betrayal* he paraphrases Maistre in these words: ‘if you [...] liberate the serfs, why then your country will be plunged into the most vicious revolution. It will go from barbarism into anarchy.’ There is no basis in Maistre for the reference to despotism in the transcript, where the ‘quotation’ is in any case a loose paraphrase of Maistre, who directly mentions neither barbarism nor the absence of a civilised interval.

Decembrist revolt, and more particularly in the 1840s, and this policy was openly preached by really black reactionaries like Leont'ev and Pobedonostsev in the later nineteenth century. Yet these efforts to try to suffocate knowledge, prevent progress in the arts and sciences, to freeze (*podmorožit'*) Russia, which was the official formula of the obscurantists of the 1880s, was clearly a hopeless business. Ideas did enter; they were understood, they were acted upon, and all the revolutionary consequences which Maistre gloomily predicted did begin to occur. As Voltaire had remarked of the French Revolution, 'It was books that did it all.'⁴ This may be an exaggeration, but it contains far more truth than either Marxists or irrationalist historiographers will grant.

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

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

need, experienced by every powerful country, to develop a technological defence against technologically superior neighbours.

At any rate, Western ideas entered, and the Western ideas in question were to some degree Romantic ideas, stimulated largely by the German thinker Herder. Although the Russians did not read Herder more widely than they read other Germans, his ideas were very popular in Germany; they rapidly travelled to other countries, and in popularised and simplified forms affected a good many young Russian thinking men in the 1820s, 1830s and 1840s. The central idea relevant to my thesis, for which Herder was responsible, is the notion of the individual *Volksgeist*; that is to say, the idea that it is not the case, as some French *philosophes* maintained, that men are similar everywhere, that the same laws produce similar results upon them, so that a general sociology can be formulated which will tell you, given knowledge of physical and other discoverable empirical circumstances, how the human beings placed in them are likely to develop. Herder taught that there existed certain specific differences, not so much of nations (in which he did not believe), but of cultural groups (largely determined by language) which exhibited unique public personalities of their own. Herder elucidated in a very compelling and imaginative fashion the notion of ‘belonging’ – of being a member of a whole – which previous philosophers had not explained to any important extent.

What does it mean to belong to a group? For Herder, to belong to a group was not simply to be born in the same soil as others, or to obey the same laws, or even to speak the same language as others. These were not sufficient conditions of being truly a member of a single unique group to which, willy-nilly and not by choice, you necessarily *belonged*. As a result, perhaps, of geographical and physical development, certain collections of human beings, according to Herder, developed a common language and common habits, and, as a result, a common culture. A culture to him meant at least something of this kind: If a man was rightly called a German, then the way in which he walked and ate and stood and sat, the way in which he created his legal system,

the way in which he sang, the kind of books he wrote, the kind of dances he danced, the kind of songs he sang, the kind of political constitution which tended to develop amongst him and those like him, would have certain properties, family properties, in virtue of which all these dissimilar activities would be more akin, resemble each other more, in impalpable ways than they resembled corresponding activities or ways of feeling and thought among, say, the Chinese or the Portuguese. A German could properly develop his nature and characteristics only among other Germans, because he felt at home only among other Germans, and to feel at home meant that there were certain pattern properties, difficult to describe – gestalt properties – in virtue of which a certain way of arranging one's hair, a certain way of accenting one's voice, a certain attitude towards public life, a certain mode of musical composition, a certain sort of handwriting, a certain sort of legal system – all of these possessed certain qualities in common, in virtue of which you could say of a piece of handwriting or a vase, or a document or a mode of living, that it did or did not belong to a given human group or a given culture. The whole idea of the typical and the characteristic, in terms of which people began to attribute things – so that one could say that a painting or a sentiment or a gesture was typically Renaissance, or typically eighteenth-century, or typically radical, or typically Russian, or even typically Nizhny Novgorod – that kind of talk, which is part of the very texture of our thought and speech today, would not have been very intelligible before the middle, and indeed the second third, of the eighteenth century.

This was Herder's historic achievement. He went further than this, and said not only that there existed certain characteristics in terms of which certain kinds of common outlook and common behaviour could be defined, something in terms of which the people who shared them could be identified as a single group, and in terms of which the lives of these people were, in fact, determined. He said more: that members of a single culture moved towards a common goal, which entailed, and was entailed by, the culture in question and it alone. Human life was unintelligible

unless you could understand that men were social in their very essence; and created things communally, in a semi-collective fashion. Ballads, forms of dancing, language – none of these things were individual creations. Language was not something which a given individual happened to invent. As Maistre, mocking the French Encyclopedists, said, it is not true to say that language, like everything else, was created by division of labour; language was not made like a machine, by the addition of mechanical components on the part of skilful technicians. Are we to believe that one generation of men said BA, and the second generation said BE, that the Assyrians invented the nominative and the Medes invented the genitive?⁵ This is not how language grows. There is such a process as impersonal growth, for which no particular person is responsible. Moreover cultures, like individuals, can be said to seek certain forms of satisfaction, even if no specific individual is aware of this, which could be called their goals. Happiness for the Germans is different from happiness for the French. The specific gravity – the central point – of one nation differs from that of another. Satisfaction for the Chinese is different from satisfaction for the Peruvians. This is because they grew up differently, and they seek after something different, and their works of art are differing forms of collective self-expression.

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

⁵ Joseph de Maistre, *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, second conversation: *Oeuvres complètes de J. de Maistre* (Lyon/Paris, 1884–7), iv 88.

communicated was a vision unique to the communicator, not a public entity which anyone with eyes might see.

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

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

The Russians caught at all this eagerly. In 1815 a large and powerful nation has just won a major war; it is headed by a small

class of persons, educated in Western ideas, which have little – too little – application to Russian reality. Anybody who studies the works of Voltaire, or Montesquieu, or Rousseau (which are what the educated Russians, like all civilised Europeans, read), and then begins to think of how such ideas might be applied to Russian realities, is faced by the apparently insuperable obstacles of Russia's conditions, which I need not rehearse. If these ideas are too remote for Russian realities, then one is faced with the alternatives of trying to mould – or break – the reality in the name of the ideas; or else of ignoring the reality, repressing its natural life, lest it break the minimum means required to keep it going at all.

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

This inner split is clearly observable even in the enlightened Alexander, and adds to the enigmatic quality of that ambivalent figure. Observe him, educated by his Swiss tutor, with his New Dealers around him, trying to reform the constitution, trying to reform Russian conditions; but the task is obviously far too great, and there is, moreover, a great war coming. Furthermore, it is quite obvious that any serious attempt at radical reform is likely to stir

up all kinds of dormant forces, breed dangerous, uncontrolled movements which may shake the Church and the throne. Hence the de facto abandonment of the central reforms – for example, those of serfdom, civil liberties, obsolete feudal institutions, agrarian backwardness, obstacles to trade and industry, lack of education. They are abandoned not out of bad will, but because the would-be reformers feel that these kinds of concepts, these Western ideas, are too dangerous to apply, even by degrees, to too backward a people. And so you find what you always do in these backward conditions: groups of intellectuals, bred on Western ideas, with no appropriate occupation in a medieval country, no jobs, no way of employing their unemployed energies, who either become depressed into a corrosive self-contempt and easy cynicism, or into acts of ineffectual revolt; or simply into quietism and passivity, a fate common enough among intellectuals in oppressed countries.

The first person to give vent to all this was Chaadaev. Chaadaev asked all the questions which came to preoccupy the Russian intelligentsia for ever afterwards. Chaadaev is the first person who says, in the spirit of the Herderian movement: What about us, our culture? Why do we exist? Is there some goal or purpose for which we were created? The French clearly fulfil their natural selves; so do the English; Western culture is a going concern; it produces magnificent works of art and great works of science. And we? Have we a history to which we can look back with any degree of pride, something which will inspire us with glory, inspire us with examples for the future? Karamzin has indeed written a magnificent history of the Russian Empire, but if you look at it more closely you will find that our history is empty. Our history contains nothing of the slightest interest to an educated man. Our history is the history of ignorance, brutality and failure. Our past is squalid: wandering tribes, feeble Byzantinism, Tatars, Poles, palace politics, the aping of foreign customs, poverty, stupidity, darkness. And our present? Our future? What is the cosmic mission of this great nation of many millions, living in sordid misery and ignorance? Is there some part for us to play in the drama of history?

According to the Romantic movement, every human being, every human group, every association of human beings must have a goal, a purpose, the realising of which will give it satisfaction. What are our goals? Are we, perhaps, a slip, a mistake of the creator? Are we simply a hideous abortion of the creative process – a caution to other peoples, intended by God to warn them against following our own wretched path?

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

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

This is a proposition which is afterwards repeated by Herzen and Chernyshevsky, then by a good many people in the 1780s, and triumphantly enunciated by no less an authority than Isaac Deutscher. Perhaps there is something peculiarly advantageous about joining the race so late, because this may free one from some painful stages passed by others – for example, the Industrial Revolution – whose fruits the latecomers may enjoy without having laboured to create them. They invent, we enjoy; they make the discoveries, they go through the terrible toil and tears and blood that are the price of creating a civilisation, while we, being fresh, young, strong, numerous, powerful, may be able simply to pluck the fruits of the trees which they have grown with such care and suffering, and even use them against their creators, or if not against them, at any rate for our own advantage. This is, in effect, the second sermon of Chaadaev, and it too became a central topic in all subsequent social discussion in Russia.

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

French must pursue, a specific element which they add to European culture, so that we must keep a sharp look-out – prepare ourselves most carefully not to miss our national or cultural cue – and play the historical role which providence has provided for us?

These writers are too confident for this; they simply try to create the best works of art that they can; or to make discoveries and inventions to the best of their ability. Whoever achieves these things is duly admired and confers glory upon his country. The Germans, who came rather later into the European picture, are concerned by the problem of whether there exists a special German mission or message for the world; they discover it all too easily – not one mission, but many conflicting ones. But even they, by the 1830s and 1840s, are not wholly preoccupied with themselves. The Russians are far more narcissistic. All Russian literature after the 1830s is about Russia. There are certain exceptions, but broadly speaking the works of Gogol, of Tolstoy, of Dostoevsky, even of Turgenev, who is regarded as the purest artist of them all, are preoccupied with Russia, the Russian past, the Russian future, the varieties of Russian soul, what we are and what we should be, or should not be; the peculiar glories and miseries of being a Russian nobleman, a Russian peasant, a Russian writer, in the nineteenth century.

This springs largely from the peculiar coincidence of the emergence of Russia as a world power with the rise of the Romantic conception according to which every group has a goal, every human being has an end, a function or mission which can and must be discovered. This, together with the obvious fact that the Russian mission is far from self-evident – that, if it does exist, it seems heavily veiled from sight – causes an anxious and, at times, agonising desire to seek for an answer, for a pattern which will once and for all make clear what we are and where we should go. Religion is obviously unsatisfactory; at least, the Orthodox Church has obviously not got enough of a hold on the educated minority, brought up on the scepticism of the French and the metaphysics of the Germans, to provide a sufficient answer to their problems. Nor does politics provide it; nor do the facts of public life, which

are extremely shaming, depressing, and such as no man of intelligence or good will would possibly contemplate without the acutest feelings of horror and humiliation.

There is something very remarkable about a country in which a large section of the educated public feel it to be their duty to remain in permanent opposition; where Herzen says that Russian literature is nothing but one vast indictment against the Russian state,⁶ or where Korolenko, writing in the twentieth century, declared, ‘Russian literature became my homeland.’⁷ When he said this, nobody was in any doubt about what he meant. It would be odd if a writer in England, let us say Somerset Maugham, were to say, ‘English literature became my homeland.’ What would this mean to the average reader of a newspaper? It would not mean very much if a French writer suddenly said, ‘French literature became my homeland.’ If Malraux said that, it would be far from clear what he meant. When Korolenko said what he did, his meaning was all too clear. This could have been said equally well by Belinsky or Chernyshevsky or even Turgenev. His audience would understand him to mean that although he loved his country and his people, yet Russian history was a history of crimes, vices, follies, disasters, weakness; heroism and martyrdom on one side, repression and brutality on the other; whereas Russian literature was a great moral instrument, and a great political instrument too, a mirror in which you could see the genuine ideals of humanity in general, and of Russian society in particular.

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

⁷ **‘Я нашел тогда свою родину, и этой родиной стала прежде всего русская литература.’** Literally: ‘I discovered my own homeland, and that homeland became, above all, Russian literature.’ *Istoriya moego sovremennika*, chapter 27: V. G. Korolenko, *Sobranie sochinenii v pyati tomakh* (Leningrad, 1989–91), iv 270.

Literature is criticism of life, said Matthew Arnold.⁸ But in Russia it was a very concrete and specific criticism of the historical evolution of Russian society. Hence History with a capital H, the patterns and purposes of history, and the theories of history, might have been created for the imaginations of Russian intellectuals. The early history of the Russian intelligentsia – the 1830s and 1840s – is full of talk about the philosophy of history. Is history determined or is there freedom of the will? Is Hegel right or wrong? Is the truth in Saint-Simon or in Fourier or in some other teacher – Feuerbach, Comte, Schelling, Count August Cieszkowski? These discussions went on everywhere. They occur in the native countries of Hegel and Saint-Simon to some degree also, on a more theoretical level. Professors discussed these questions, young poets discussed them, other young intellectuals talked about them, but in the comparatively calm spirit in which people can now talk about Spengler or Beard or Toynbee. There are those who think that Toynbee's schemata of world history are correct: and those who deride him. Nothing follows in practice. It is very difficult to find someone whose life is so Toynbee-ridden that his whole moral, intellectual, political and social mode of existence is literally transformed by the thought that since he is living in such and such an age, X must be the challenge, Y is the proper response, and therefore one must dedicate one's life to A rather than B. But this was literally true about the Russians.

It was Herzen again who said that Russians did not lack logic, what they lacked was good judgement. He was attracted and repelled by the spectacle of men who accepted certain intellectual premisses because they were guaranteed by Western authorities and argued from these premisses in a perfectly rigorous fashion. They were not at all lacking in logic, not mystical or preoccupied or vague, not muddled; on the contrary, all too rigid, all too lucid.

⁸ 'The work of the two orders of men [those famous 'for ever' and those famous 'in their own generation'] is at bottom the same, – a criticism of life. The end and aim of all literature, if one considers it attentively, is, in truth, nothing but that.' Joubert, *Essays in Criticism* (London, 1865), 249.

They argued from these premisses to certain conclusions; and if the conclusions were eccentric, or appallingly difficult, to translate into practice, wished to implement them all the more passionately: bent their will desperately to achieve them. The attitude was that the more unpalatable the conclusions, the more categorical the obligation to implement them in practice, since if one retreats before difficulties this merely indicates moral weakness. The attitude is one of total commitment: if the premisses are true, the argument correct, and the conclusions valid, then by God one must try to implement them, because not to do that is to betray the truth, not to do or say what you know to be correct; and what is this but moral betrayal, something that no honest man can permit himself? The more agonising the choice, the holier: the less realisable the plan, the greater must be the enthusiasm, the dedication, the martyrdom. That is the mood of some of the young, left-wing intellectuals grouped around Herzen, Belinsky and their successors in the 1860s and 1870s and after.

Belinsky was correctly described as the protomartyr of this movement.⁹ The search for an altar on which to immolate himself is very patent. First the unworldly, elitist, aestheticising, pre-Hegelian phase. Then Hegel and the belief that everything is rationally determined, part of a rational world plan; hence the disasters of history are necessary discords which contribute to a vast harmony which will be visible only from a higher, historically later standpoint; that, at least, is his interpretation of Hegel, and it is not nearly as incorrect as some later interpreters have tried to make out. When Belinsky argues, it is not just theoretical conclusions to which he comes, as a literary critic, or as a man who talks in a salon, discussing these things with his friends; he tries to shape his life accordingly, and preaches his doctrine, say ‘reconciliation to reality’¹⁰ – rationalist quietism – or rebellion, or materialism. The young men read his articles avidly, and having read are moved to dedicate themselves to all the various, often

⁹ Cf. SR2 343 and note 3.

¹⁰ Cf. SR2 361 and note 2.

dangerous activities the need for which seems to follow from the truth of his propositions, and from the necessity of realising them in practice.

No doubt this occurred in France and Germany too. But the intensity seems greater in Russia, and the simplicity and naivety too. Unless we can tell the shape of history, how can we know what to do? Herzen asks whether history has a libretto. This is no idle theoretical speculation. It is urgently necessary to know whether Hegel and the determinists are right, whether there are certain objective laws that govern mankind, so that to oppose these laws is folly and madness; for if this is so, one must discover what these laws are, and then adapt oneself to them; whereas if, on the contrary, it is the case that all such schemes and laws are simply human inventions of a rather bogus kind, life acquires a different colour. Perhaps Granovsky is right after all – perhaps it is only small intellects that settle comfortably into one dominant idea and go to sleep in it like a bed. Perhaps, after all, nature is much more various, much richer, much less capable of being squeezed into narrow man-made patterns than the Russian Hegelians, at any rate, suppose. If so, there is far greater room for human freedom, far greater room for human invention, spontaneity, imagination, for altering the lives both of individuals and of nations, in accordance with ideals which are not necessarily deduced from a rigid historical pattern. When Herzen argues about this, this is not simply the casual meditation *in vacuo* of a *déclassé* and uprooted Russian intellectual, as some people have tried to represent it. He is trying to work out a programme for practical action. He wants to know whether the West is, as some Westerners say, rotting, in decline, finished – so that one adopts its values to one's own destruction – or whether, on the contrary, it is the source of the arts and sciences, the home of all truth and progress, which we backward, barbarous, latter-day Russian Anacharses should humbly imitate.

Herzen concludes that history has no libretto,¹¹ and draws semi-existentialist conclusions in his early essays. Belinsky says there *is* a

¹¹ Cf. RT2 105 and note 1.

libretto, and then decides this cannot be true, for if the libretto is what it is represented as being by Hegel and his disciples, it is too horrible: and incompatible with any degree of moral consciousness on the part of men. It involves so much condonation of so much brutality, idiocy and cruelty that no human being with a normal degree of moral sensibility could bring himself to accept it; and therefore he rejects the entire conception as doing too much violence to men's ethical sense. This entails a new vision of history: there is always some historical framework, never a timeless ethical or scientific schema of the kind dear to the eighteenth century, or its belated disciple, Tolstoy.

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

This is not, in Chernyshevsky's mind, or Dobrolyubov's or Pisarev's, simply the product of empirical observation, or a moral system, as it often is in the contemporary West. When John Stuart Mill discusses what ought to be done, the questions for him are largely moral, that is: What would make society happier? This policy rather than that. Which acts of Parliament should be passed? These rather than those. The problems are not posed in historico-

evolutionary terms, as part either of a blind material, or of a purposive, system. When Bismarck clashes with liberals in Germany, there is not a very great deal of talk, at least conscious talk, about the fact that, history being as it is, it is prescribed that we must follow it along a certain path, since if we do not, we shall betray the whole pattern of our development, commit the crime and error of fighting the cosmos. There is no conscious talk by the political ideologues of the 1870s of patterns built into our German organism which are such that, if we proceed to deviate from them, we shall destroy ourselves, betray our pre-established destiny – the goals which history has specially set up for and in us. You do not get this kind of patter among serious men. But in Russia this is done solemnly and by men of the highest gifts.

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

The alternative hell is the Protestant pulverisation of society into atomic individuals, unable to co-operate except on the basis

of cold contractual laws, rules and regulations written down by officials, leading to, and symptomatic of, the kind of relations between human beings that are remote from affection or solidarity or sense of community – the entire system of claims and rights, rights which are always walls that divide people from each other, as opposed to the communal structure in which the Russians still live, in which men are bound by the kind of love that members of a family bear one another, at the opposite pole to those who are constantly jealously watching others lest they be robbed of some portion of their own coveted rights, lest they be deceived or done down by some rapacious usurper, some vulture ready to pounce on them from some outside vantage point. When a Khomyakov talks like that, and elaborates his historical tapestry, he is not merely describing the past: he has in mind something immediate, concrete and political. He wants the Russian state to pursue certain policies, internal and external – and he speaks for the other Slavophiles. And there were enough young men to listen to him who, if only they could get into power, if only they could get into responsible positions, would try to alter public policies in the light of these ideas.

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

Mokrievich, the young Mikhailovsky are always invoking a historical image, a historical pattern, in contrast to similar arguments in Europe.

In the disputes between the German conservatives and the German liberals this is far less frequent. There we find plenty of general reference to national tradition, historicist theories of law, what we Germans (or Western Slavs or Italians) stand for, and so forth, but we do not, for the most part, find specific interpretation of the past, designed to demonstrate a precise objective pattern as dominant in history, a pattern which must be understood in detail if one is to be effective at all. Thus Tkachev says that we must rapidly create an elite of trained revolutionaries (not that Tkachev is particularly historicist; but still, the fact that even he is drawn into this maelstrom is symptomatic enough), because we must have a revolution quickly. If we do not, the enemy will get us, and there may be no revolution at all. It is clear that we cannot have a revolution if the peasants have to be educated first, because they are a vast inert mass, ignorant, stupid and reactionary; nor do they want a revolution; and it will take years before they can be awoken to a proper revolutionary consciousness. Hence, if the right kind of society is to emerge, the only thing is to do things for people – make a revolution for them, not with them: for they will only ruin us. We, the dedicated revolutionary elite, having studied the ways in which culture has to be brought to people, and who wish liberty to be attained, must do this, because if we do not, and very soon too, the moment will be past – the historic moment. What is this historic moment? One can work it out from observation of the historic pattern. When the moment – the *kairos* – occurs, you must strike. It may never recur. Unless you train a ruthless elite, this cannot be done.

To which the populists reply: If you make a revolution by means of your small elite, then observe what happened in the past, what happened with the Jacobins – see what happened in France. If you want a small elite which makes a revolution against the wishes of the people (because they do not understand the need for it and do not desire it), then this elite has to act dictatorially, and protect itself

against counter-revolution. In the course of this it must accumulate a good deal of power: there are always counter-revolutionaries everywhere; the people go on being stupid and perverse; they may not like being hectored and bullied, even for their own good; therefore you – the revolutionary elite – will have to repress them, squash them; in the course of this you will create a self-perpetuating elite, and goodbye to the liberties of the people.

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

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

excellent account of the debates in his book *Roots of Revolution* – is batted forwards and backwards, always in terms of historical examples, always in terms of the notion that there is light to be obtained from the actual laws of history.

So, too, Mikhailovsky, when he moves into the centre of the stage – somewhere in the late 1870s and the 1880s – is concerned to demonstrate that, for example, determinism is not true. The old human problem of free will and determinism – not, so far as I can see, yet solved – has been discussed for more than two millennia, never more intensively than in our own time. The people who discuss it are usually either philosophers talking about it professionally, or ordinary persons who occasionally give the matter a thought, occasionally feel worried about it – it seldom fills their lives. But the case of the Russians is different. It was crucially important for Mikhailovsky to prove that what Darwin, or at least his sociological adapters, maintained was not true; or that Marx was mistaken, since it is not the case that human beings are slaves of inexorable historical laws, ‘little toes’,¹² as he put it, upon the foot of some vast impersonal organism which cannot determine itself but is determined by something over which they have no control. For in that case freedom is an illusion, the agony of moral choice is a delusion, we are ciphers, we are cogs in an enormous historical machine; and to think this is to let revolutionary zeal drain away, to let the struggles of human beings to create better moral and intellectual conditions for and by themselves come to an end, to believe that this will have to be left to the historical forces, which operate at their own pace, in their own way.

For Mikhailovsky it is very important that this, and still more its terrible implications, should be shown to be false, since, in fact, he did believe it to be false; and so he spent pages and pages of argument on this. This was not, for him or his readers, a theoretical issue: upon the solution you arrive at will depend what form the conspiracy should take; whether, for example, you should join *Narodnaya volya*, and proceed to enter a Jacobin conspiracy,

¹² Untraced.

concentrate all your meagre reserves on assassinating the tsar, upheaving the country and creating chaos, because from this – given free will and the desire for and knowledge of the good life – a better form of society will necessarily arise; whereas, on the contrary, if you say that this is impossible because the laws of history are such that no putsch, no violence will produce this desirable result unless this or that stage is reached – because history works in an unalterable way – then you must plan things very differently.

The outcome of this argument will affect actual tactics; it did so affect the tactics of the very people whose intellectual and political work created the atmosphere and the soil for the Russian Revolution. Again, Herzen wrote to Bakunin in 1869 (in the *Letters to an Old Comrade*) and told him he was mistaken; that one could not make revolutions without regard to the historical stage reached by a given society, because if one made revolutions while people were still bourgeois and pursued bourgeois ideals, the revolution would not produce a socialist result. ‘Out of the stones of a prison-house one cannot build a dwelling for the free.’¹³ Therefore you must wait; therefore gradualism; one must realise that history has its own pace which cannot be forced; we cannot always indulge in what Herzen calls Petrogradism – that is, the sudden breaking of the traditional in some violent and catastrophic fashion. Peter the Great could, Attila could, we cannot: the laws of history – or sociology, as some prefer – tell us why. The appeal, even by Herzen – not an obsessed historicist – is still to the possibility of discovering the pattern of history, such that if you can satisfy yourself that it is the true pattern, you will know what to do; above

¹³ Herzen wrote that the French radicals of 1848 ‘want, without altering the walls [of the prison], to give them a new function, as if a plan for a jail could be used for a free existence’ (‘хотят, не меняя стен, дать им иное назначение, как будто план острога может годиться для свободной жизни’), ‘**S togo berega**’ [‘From the Other Shore’], chapter 3, A. I. Gertsen [Herzen], *Sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* (Moscow, 1954–66) vi 51; Alexander Herzen, *From the Other Shore*, trans. Moura Budberg, and *The Russian People and Socialism*, trans. Richard Wollheim, with an introduction by Isaiah Berlin (London, 1956) 57.

all, what is utopia, what cannot be done, at any rate in the way that the unhistorical Bakunin wants it done.

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

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

societies must go through before they reach the point at which the proletariat overthrows the bourgeoisie?¹⁴

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

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

¹⁴ This is a reference to an exchange between Vera Zasulich and Marx. **Zasulich's letter** was written on 16 February 1881, and **Marx replied** on 8 March. See Teodor Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the 'Peripheries of Capitalism'* (New York, 1983), 98–9, and Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (London, New York and Moscow, 1975–2004), xlvii 71–2.

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

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

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

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

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

The whole of the great dispute about whether values are objective or subjective, whether they are historically produced, or produced by the rise of one class or another, or on the contrary whether there are such things as values beyond classes, which apply to all human beings, which are transcendental, is a dispute about historicism. The heresies which it was held, at the beginning of this century, had been fallen into by people like Lunacharsky or Bogdanov or Bazarov – that is, ‘god-builders’ and ‘god-seekers’¹⁵ and so on – were denounced in the first place for their alleged misunderstanding of the historic process – always by Plekhanov, to some degree also by Lenin.

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

¹⁵ ‘Bogostroitelei’ and ‘bogoiskateli’.

was comparatively distant from his thoughts. I do not deny that this is partly due to the fact that Bakunin was at once an extremely dynamic and very frivolous man; and therefore did not want to concern himself too much with intellectual problems at all. He used metaphysics for his own ends: it fed his imagination and temperament, as myths do those of a poet. What he wanted was action, to set things on fire wherever and whenever possible: *on s'engage et puis on verra*.¹⁶ The first thing to do is break, blow up, set things on fire, and then we shall do what we can. He was not going to be deterred from the resolve to do something very violent, very explosive by a few logical arguments or historical analogies – or by scientific induction, in spite of his respect, or ostensible respect, for Marx and the achievements of ‘science’.

The same is true, though in a much milder degree, about Kropotkin. Perhaps it is the result of this that anarchism in Russia was so negligible a movement. Apart from the rather bogus anarchism of the Green International in 1917–19, the only anarchists I know about are a body of men with black flags who occupied several buildings in Moscow, and were in the end easily and ruthlessly liquidated by Trotsky. Trotsky himself, indeed, offers a good example of the kind of historicism I mean. Anybody who constantly uses the category ‘the waste-paper basket of history’,¹⁷ as Trotsky does, into which those who are not

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

¹⁷ Cf. AC2 287/2. The original (variously translated) phrase, ‘pomoinaya yama istorii’, first occurs in the first paragraph of ‘The Collapse of Terror and Its Party (On the Azef Case)’, in L. Trotsky, *Sochineniya* (Leningrad, 1926), iv 345; this article was first published in Polish in 1909, but without this paragraph (because it was less relevant to a Polish readership?). In 1917, according to Nikolay Sukhanov (who was there), Trotsky used the phrase ‘sornaya korzina

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

Tolstoy, of course, is a famous case of anti-historicism, but he was conscious of uttering paradoxes. When Tolstoy says that history does not answer the questions we want answered, that history ‘is like a deaf man who answers questions nobody has asked him’,¹⁸ his point is that there are certain important questions which trouble us – about moral standards, the ends of life, the nature of power, what makes some human beings able to command other people, what dominates human lives, why enormous numbers of men suddenly move from East to West and then from West to East, as in the Napoleonic Wars or the great migrations – and that history is incapable of answering these; historians deal with a lot of boring trivialities. In saying this, Tolstoy is well aware that he stands against the general current of his day. He is delighted to do this because he is a somewhat perverse thinker and wishes to discomfit the smug progressive intelligentsia. My point is that everyone writing in Russia had to come to terms with history somewhere, even if only to defy it. Few were content just to ignore the philosophy of history or to be uninterested in it, as might be the case in the West. Tolstoy swam against the intellectual current of his time quite consciously and opposed to the historicism of his

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

¹⁸ *War and Peace*, epilogue, part 2, chapter 1: L. N. Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow/Leningrad, 1928–64) xii 300.

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

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

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

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

DISCUSSION

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

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

No, I was wrong. When I started to answer your question I was slightly run away with by the memory of the man who wanted to return the ticket, by Ivan Karamazov.¹⁹ All that Dostoevsky is arguing against is utilitarianism. All he is arguing against is secularism and faith in science. All he is arguing against is the primacy of happiness – the belief that the happiness of mankind is a sufficient reward to make up for spiritually wicked acts. But he does believe that history has a goal, that this goal is spiritual in character, and that any attempt to barter the soul of a single child for the happiness of untold millions is not only immoral, because it is against Christian ethics, but also unlikely to succeed, because God is good and history follows a divine pattern. And therefore I am wrong. After all, Dostoevsky is to be included as at any rate influenced by this view – but in a very, very loose way, because people who believe that history is a religious drama, which follows certain stages, do not give dates and do not look for empirical evidence of whether mankind has or has not reached a given stage. In some Bossuet-like sense he is a historicist, but in a very large sense in which no specific empirical evidence is relevant.

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

¹⁹ ‘When, in the famous passage, Ivan Karamazov rejects the worlds upon worlds of happiness which may be bought at the price of the torture to death of one innocent child, what can utilitarians, even the most civilised and humane, say to him? After all, it is in a sense unreasonable to throw away so much human bliss purchased at so small a price as *one* – only one – innocent victim, done to death however horribly – what after all is one soul against the happiness of so many? Nevertheless, when Ivan says he would rather return the ticket, no reader of Dostoevsky thinks this cold-hearted or mad or irresponsible; and although a long course of Bentham or Hegel might turn one into a supporter of the Grand Inquisitor, qualms remain’ (L 338). Dostoevsky wrote: ‘too high a price has been placed on harmony. We cannot afford to pay so much for admission. And therefore I hasten to return my ticket of admission.’ *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. David Magarshack, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth, UK: 1958), i 287.

BERLIN Why does this come into the question of historicism?

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

BERLIN No, I don't see what it has to do with Russian history at all. I don't see what it has to do with Russian history in particular. Why should it have anything at all to do with Russian history rather than English history or Latin American history? The same situation could occur anywhere, could not it? Smerdyakov is a casualty, because Smerdyakov is the revenge of God upon the father, because Smerdyakov is the product of hideous conditions, of frightful lies, falsifications. But this can happen to any human beings anywhere. And Smerdyakov is partly the product of materialist cynicism on the part of the father, and, of course, the Russian intelligentsia are, according to Dostoevsky, affected by this, and to that extent it is anti-progressive – anti-left-wing. But it is not historicist or unhistoricist, I should have thought. But I don't know; I am not an authority on Dostoevsky. This is the opinion of only one reader.

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

MERLE FAINSOD Imperatives of industrialisation, stages of economic growth.

BERLIN Yes, perhaps it has happened in the West to a certain extent, and this is a curious revenge of Russia upon the West. I was thinking mainly, I admit, of the nineteenth century, but what you say is true. This kind of sociology of dominant – that people are dominated by the idea of the inexorability of certain industrial patterns, particularly, I suppose, backward nations, who seek to go through the same stages themselves, in order to get to the same point as advanced societies – but I wonder if this is historicism. If you simply say that in order to get to such and such a point, to which you need not get if you do not want to, you must act thus and thus – this is only an indication of the means to an end which is not inevitable. Of course, if you *want* to be industrialised, you must want to be powerful; but this is up to you. You might actually want something else – say a Welfare State, and not a powerful state. But *if* you want to be industrialised, or if you want to be autarkic or powerful or dominate somebody, *then* the proper way of doing it is by stages one, two, three. This is quite different (this is a purely hypothetical imperative) from saying that such and such must happen to us sooner or later, whether we want it or not. Then it emerges as a piece of scientific sociology: in order to get to end X you have to go through stages A, B, C, but you need not set out on this path at all.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

a far more elaborate historical construction, but the same tendency is at work also in Germany.

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

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

RICARD PIPES I should like to bolster the case for your thesis for the nineteenth century, and question it for the twentieth. You unnecessarily let the historians off the historicist hook for the nineteenth century. Of course, compared to the *intelligently* like Belinsky, Chernyshevsky and Mikhailovsky, professional historians were less preoccupied with historiosophical questions, yet still they were, more so than their Western counterparts. You mentioned Solov'ev, who is a historian's historian; but there is a famous long opening chapter in his *History* which is philosophical. Karamzin has the same sort of chapter, in which he drafts a pattern for Russian historical development. Chicherin, who, in addition to being a political thinker, was a working historian, very deliberately introduced Hegelian themes into his concept of Russian feudalism. Semevsky, a populist historian, and Kostomarov had theses. It is easier to write the history of Russian historiography as intellectual history than of any Western country.

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

PIPES It does. It does.

BERLIN You think it does?

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

BERLIN In Chicherin?

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

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

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

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

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

BERLIN No.

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

terms of an obsessive, even mildly obsessive, theory, so that if it does not quite work, if disagreeable facts turn up ...

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

BERLIN Yes, there are some general ideas that he is interested in – all intellectuals, all highbrows in Russia adopt this tone, this attitude. But there is a difference between that and the people who, like, say, Struve, asked: Is there ten per cent freedom in history or is there not? We must settle this. We must settle this because if we settle it one way then it is disastrous for our political beliefs. Supposing that deterministic Marxists are right, supposing there is not even ten per cent of freedom, then what is the point of being and doing X or Y, which we are exhorted to do? On the other hand, if the ten per cent exists, then forward to our task.

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

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

PIPES Is it not?

BERLIN No, and it depends on how one reads it; I agree that there are many ways. I am thinking about the metaphysical passages, those huge neo-Hegelian digressions – sentences which might have been copied out of the works of Hegel himself – about the ascent of man. You may say it is like *War and Peace* – the philosophy has nothing to do with the development of the novel. But the philosophy is there, in Pasternak. He says that once upon a time men wandered in herds, that they were depersonalised. Then there arose Christianity. With the development of Christianity unimportant persons became important. The fact that Jesus lived in an obscure country and was socially and politically a nobody was vastly significant. The whole idea of human personality and its individual work is born. There is a terrific shift in moral categories: even the sufferings of one innocent man become important. This was for him due to a historical event, the rise of Christianity. Then came Roman Emperors, pock-marked tyrants (which may or may not be a reference to Stalin), who proceeded to ignore this, and trampled on it, and so forth. Nevertheless the human spirit triumphed over this. And the Revolution is accused of not understanding that historical development is the achievement of individuals, that refusal to mouth general slogans, be flattered into some artificial uniformity, is not counter-revolutionary or retrogressive; that the elemental chaos of revolution cannot be reduced to order by mechanical means; creation of depersonalised armies is bound to fail, because man was no longer the *Messenmensch* he had been, and so on.

This stress on new categories – the individual as the only source of values, moral, aesthetic and so on – is very Cohenian. Neo-Kantianism in Marburg in 1912 is not unhistoricist, in spite of the value of *Sollen*. It demands sacrifice to great ideals, which were

transcendental, outside time and space, and binding on all men, which was, no doubt, the central position of neo-Kantianism. Nevertheless, they have to be intuited in their historical contexts. And the history of mankind is the history of the pursuit of these ideals, pursued remorselessly, historically and progressively. This is a theory of human progress, by which these universal ideals are gradually understood better and better, and applied to concrete conditions and so forth, so that we are gradually approaching – asymptotically – the unattainable goal towards which the ages flow, the Christ beyond the limits. There is a historical progressivism about neo-Kantianism in this age at this stage.

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

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

gradually float to their tryst; they are marshalled in an order. The generations do not follow each other in chaos, helter-skelter.

This may be Christian ideology; it is certainly a neo-Kantian sermon – a Romantic, rather fanciful, noble historicism. Nothing follows so far as immediate action is concerned: this is true. But the vision is not unhistoricist. Real anti-historicism is very different. Hemingway really is an unhistorical writer. He really is a writer whom history does not touch. Hemingway's heroes have no brothers, no sisters, no father, no mother, no origins, no past. There is a vacuum round them. This is the very opposite of Pasternak. Apart from his other purposes, he is trying to set his characters in a historical framework. The Revolution as he describes it, the evolution of opinion as he describes it, is a theodicy: this is how the great elemental forces strike – in a manner which he thought of as at once self-explaining and Shakespearean, fortuitous yet pursuing an inner pattern. There is an extraordinary intoxication with the vast and illimitable nature of the great historical cataclysm through which we have lived – a crucial moment in the human drama – drama, not causal sequence or chance. He gives a very definite – if wildly imaginative – interpretation of history which is anti-Marxist and therefore unacceptable in Russia today, but it is an interpretation. It is very un-Tolstoyan. He does not, like Tolstoy, say: Nobody can tell what the causes are, they are too minute, too numerous, all efforts at explanation are delusive. For Pasternak there is the human individual – Zhivago – through whose eyes the welter can be seen at various levels, as the criss-crossing of intelligible human purposes. Zhivago perished miserably, the good are done in, the brutal dominate, yet, as in Henry James's novels, the soul goes marching on – history is an intelligible process, a vast metaphysical pattern ...

FIELD I do not quite see how the populists of the 1870s, '80s and '90s are historicist in any ordinary sense. The populists like Tkachev, who wanted to forestall history, or Mikhailovsky with his

‘History has no aims, but I do, and I mean to attain them.’²⁰ Or the Danielsons and so on who wanted to translate this into economic, literal economic terms.

BERLIN You are quite right.

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

BERLIN They are not. If I maintained they were, I gave a false impression. They are not historicist, they are anti-. But the point is that their battles are fought against historicists, the field of battle is historicism or anti-historicism, that is all I wanted to say. This is the field on which they give battle. It is of supreme importance to someone like Mikhailovsky to demonstrate that historicists, who otherwise might capture the imaginations of people in Russia, are mistaken; that Darwinism is wrong, Marxism is wrong, Comte is wrong, and so on. Mikhailovsky – and this goes back to Belinsky and Herzen too – claimed passionately that human will does play a part. We can do various things: of course, not everything, there are all sorts of conditions that limit us, there are objective laws that operate, but these laws are not exhaustive of all there is. There is a large field for the employment of human freedom of choice and human liberty; and within it men, according to Mikhailovsky, can act. We can do X or Y if our will is strong enough, our minds intellectually sound enough and so on. This is anything but historicism, you are quite right. But all I wanted to say was that the argument was conducted upon the soil of historicist issues: patterns or no patterns – for these men an acute and an immediate question, and a question with extraordinary political consequences. And this is not the case in the West, it seems to me, to a nearly

²⁰ ‘Я – не цель природы, природа не имеет других целей, но у меня есть цели и я их достигну.’ (‘I am not nature’s goal, and nature has no other goals. But I have goals, and I shall attain them.’) *Geroi i tolpa* [*Heroes and the Crowd*, 1882] (Moscow, 2011), 39.160.

similar extent. I should not dream of saying Mikhailovsky was a historicist. Of course not. Nor Tkachev either. Except the argument is always historical: Are we free at all? To the extent of ten per cent? Or more or less? In what sense?

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

BERLIN No, I don’t think so. It could have taken the form of a purely moral discussion. It could have taken the form of discussing absolute standards – moral values – with no references to history. People could have said simply – as Tolstoy wanted them to – ‘This is right, this is wrong.’ It could take the form which it took in Germany, of philosophical discussion. Or, for example, of the ethical or aesthetic or empirical kind of talk that dominated the English intelligentsia, say Bloomsbury and its allies in the twentieth century, who were essentially ‘alienated’, intellectuals who did not take much part in the government of their country. Perhaps they could have taken part in this, but they did not. Well, when there are discussions, when E. M. Forster or somebody – who is a typical English intellectual – in 1938, in order to *épater*, in order to cause as much shock as possible, says, ‘if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country’,²¹ this is taking up a position with which he intended to annoy people he disapproved of, I suppose. In fact, it did not produce much of a reaction. There were plenty of agonising problems for sensitive Englishmen at this time. There were anxious discussions in the 1920s in England among

²¹ ‘Two Cheers for Democracy’, *Nation*, 16 July 1938, 65–8 at 66; repr. as ‘What I Believe’ in *Two Cheers for Democracy* (London, 1951; repr. Harmondsworth, 1965), 76.

young people about what morality is, whether moral principles were simply forms of psychological processes, causally induced – whether, for example, Freud was right, and these were rationalisations of psychophysical conditions, or, on the contrary, whether there was an objective realm of moral and aesthetic values. Is there such a thing as goodness, an objective quality of certain things, as G. E. Moore maintained, which it is possible to intuit directly? Or were the Utilitarians right? Was goodness to be identical with happiness, or with satisfaction? Or, on the contrary, was Kant right, who thought there was within us an awareness of an absolute law or duty which all men were able to see, and saw. There was much such discussion of a similarly abstract, unpractical kind, nothing to do with problems of actual power and government, which preoccupy the sensitive and critical, and occur on this or that level of abstraction.

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

paths divide? This is essentially a historicism-flavoured atmosphere. I do not mean historicist in the sense of believing there are laws of history, but in the sense of thinking the most important thing is to settle whether there are. That is my thesis, anyway.

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

that this is not just a Russian thing, but a general thing, this inferiority complex. This driven state would not be just confined to Russia, although that is a striking example, but would come any time when this problematic was in the air, when one lost a certain confidence.

BERLIN Well, I did not want to bring America into it, but I could have done. It was present in my mind. This would not be at all true of France. But America – you are very likely quite right, because of a certain similarity of conditions. This talk about: We are young, we are fresh, we are barbarous, but we have not anything of our own, is not there something we can offer Europe? They look on us as a lot of *nouveaux riches*, we are *nouveaux riches*, we are new and fresh and morally much purer and so forth. You are finishing, we are beginning. Yes, certainly; there is a strong similarity, and the same phenomenon occurred here, in a smaller degree, as in Russia. America shows this self-conscious attitude, this love and hate of Europe.

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

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

going to be, how can we continue the line of our culture and our past? And so on: this is a very Russian mood, and offers a genuine analogy.

Well, what he says is that many more creative ideas of a powerful kind were conceived in American bathrooms than in decrepit European houses. This is exactly the same aggressive, defensive note. It is perfectly true, and there is an analogy. You are quite right. I don't think it's true about France. When Musset deplores the condition of France, or Michelet or anybody else does, when they say France, they mean the world. The Russians are always comparing themselves to something else. Whereas France to the French means the world of men, mankind. It is something to do with being latecomers to the feast, and with being people whose whole historical position is questioned by other people. It is something to do with the Germans, but that is exactly my whole thesis. That is, the Germans in the eighteenth century were, in some sense, looked down upon; they had been defeated. The Americans, rightly or wrongly, in some sense, are not confident enough – not independent enough. Where are the great American composers? Where is the great American novel? Where are the great American painters, sculptors? Are there truly American schools of thinkers, architects, biologists? Is it mere chauvinism to demand them? Are we doomed to remain the disciple of Europe, proclaiming our superiority? Perhaps we have something better than they have. We may not have their experience, or genius, but we have purer hearts, deeper wisdom, the immemorial wisdom of the simple peasant ...

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

THE ADDICTION OF RUSSIAN INTELLECTUALS TO HISTORICISM

BERLIN I am sorry, weakness of, or weakness?

STUDENT Weakness for these ...

FAINSOD Their susceptibility.

BERLIN Then why ...?

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

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

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

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

STUDENT But backwardness does not necessarily explain this.

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

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

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

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

BERLIN They are not disconnected, these two. I mean general backwardness is both the cause and the effect of an inefficient and backward government. But in part the frustration is also due to this singular lack of a native intellectual tradition, which to some extent would deflate the value of foreign importations. The peculiarity of Russia is that when ideas did come from the West, there were no native counter-theories with which these things could mingle or with which they could conflict. Not many, at least.

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

BERLIN You adopt historicism partly because you want to get on. But what I wanted to say was that you become particularly susceptible to it because you are humiliated. It explains your failure and *their* success: and it offers you a path of salvation by emulation. But also, of course, historicism found fertile soil in Russia because her intellectual awakening coincided with the Romantic movement, which embodied a great deal of historicist thought. I do not wish to deny that the Romantic movement and the awakening in Russia may be products of the same ultimate causes. This may be so: but it is too large a subject to begin on at this hour. But if Russia had been awoken by some other cause – supposing that Russia had suddenly been plunged into Europe in, say, the seventeenth century – that phenomenon – I mean historicism –

would not have acquired such an influence. Suppose that history had taken quite a different turn, that Louis XIV had called Russia in against some enemy – Germany, the Turk. Suppose that the Emperor Alexis had poured troops into Europe. Is it not thinkable that Russian political development would have taken some non-historical form? That Russians would have read Racine and Molière and Bossuet, instead of reading a lot of Schiller and Hegel and Fichte, and that this would have produced quite other results? To that extent, what occurred is genuinely a coincidence. Not necessarily an accidental coincidence, but a coincidence.

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

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

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

BERLIN He did not quite think that. He thought that only those countries were ripe where there were enough desperadoes, enough people who had no stake in existing societies. And if it is the case

that only some societies are more suitable for this, for historical reasons, then he does not bother to explain it. His judgments seem very empirical, very ad hoc, based on the social atmosphere. He does not, for instance, think there can be a revolution in Sweden. You remember, he tries to go to Poland to take part in the revolution of 1863; the British boat takes him to Sweden and does not take him any further. And then he complains that the situation in Sweden is quite hopeless. The Swedes are horribly contented. There is no revolutionary spirit here. It is impossible to arouse them. There is not the slightest chance of anything happening here. The Swedes are no good. Why are the Russians some good? Because in Russia, according to him, you have absolutely landless, impoverished peasants, thrown into worse chaos by the Emancipation. There is a great ferment going on. Out of such people one can form shock troops. And one can form shock troops in other countries with desperate, lawless men – Spain, Italy and so on. Therefore backward countries are more suitable for revolution than other countries. But this is the discovery of a practical revolutionary who said: I want cadres, I want people with whom to upheave society. Give me enough desperadoes, and I shall turn everything upside down. There are no Swedish desperadoes available. But there are Russian desperadoes, there are Spanish desperadoes, and so on, no doubt for historical reasons. But that is not in itself a historical theory; although it is, I suppose, a sociological one. Give me the weapons and I could do so and so. And then you say: Well, where are they? And I say: Wherever they are – the desperate men, the economic crisis – there I can operate. I do not know how he explained the failure of Chartism. Stupidity of the leaders, I expect.

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

BERLIN Who?

KENEZ Bakunin.

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

VON LAUE According to your thesis, then, those elements in Russian society that were relatively contented, say the liberals after the turn of the century, or after 1905, showed the least inclination for historicism, because they accepted life as they found it. I am not sure whether what you said applies to the Milyukovs; there is less of the tendency it seems to me. (BERLIN Yes.) How about Tolstoy also? Is he now a historicist, or does he belong to a category like ...?

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

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

BERLIN Well, he goes on talking about it. In the moralistic stories not so much, perhaps, but he goes on discussing the subject. He

goes on talking about the nonsense which historians talk, the frightfulness of sociologists. He makes anti-scientific remarks until his death. Some of his sharpest attacks on historicism are in the educational writings of the 1870s in *Yasnaya Polyana*, which is a private journal, where he keeps on mocking at every form of advanced German theory, whether in sociology, or in education, or in history. It is all absolutely nauseating to him, nauseating and ludicrous. He thinks the whole thing is a fraudulent invention of a lot of professors. In the 1880s and '90s, I think, he forgets about it, tries to preach truths of a timeless kind – this at the very moment at which hot discussions about history are occurring; about revolution versus no revolution, gradualism versus violence, and so forth. The only thing which obsesses Tolstoy at that stage is the extreme undesirability of revolution. He says, at the turn of the century, what a pity it is that some of Herzen's works have not been published. Here is a man who went through these phases, believed in historicism, walked to the brink of the revolutionary abyss, saw that this would not do: he should be read more; it would sober up our intelligentsia quite a bit. How stupid the government is not to publish Herzen's works. They are the best antidote to the revolutionary spirit which is destroying our youth – and to the historical revolutionary spirit, what is more.

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

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

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

who needed elaborate historical constructions to find their place in the world.

BERLIN I do not know whether he was ... was he all that contented? He was rather smug, and somewhat self-satisfied – that I should not deny, but I don't know, I think Milyukov was prevented from being historicist by his extremely accurate academic knowledge of history, to a large extent. All those lectures in Bulgaria and so on. I do not know, perhaps this is unfair – Milyukov is surely a typical Western professor, who was aware of the complexity, the devious paths of human history. He was not by temperament liable to any intellectual fanaticism. Moreover, because he was a historian by profession, he was not liable to be run away with by ideas which obviously were not borne out by enough historical evidence.

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

BERLIN I should not deny it. Yes, maybe.

© The Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust and Henry Hardy 2019, 2020

Posted in Isaiah Berlin Online 15 January 2020