



Alexandre Kojève: revolution and terror

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Abstract

When discussing the French Revolution and Napoleon in his lectures from 1933 to 1939, Alexandre Kojève had in mind events in Russia. The clash between the “old order,” with its Masters, and the worker Slaves corresponded for him more with the images of pre-revolutionary Russian journalism than with the wigged aristocrats and French bourgeoisie of the end of the eighteenth century. In his lectures, behind Napoleon, as a revolutionary emperor, there exists, however secretly or openly, the figure of Stalin, with his plans for the “building of socialism in one country,” his five-year plans, collectivization, and terror. Kojève’s ontology and anthropology diverge both from Hegel’s version of the two as well as with Marxism, incorporating different theses from Nietzsche and Heidegger’s *Daseinanalytik*. Just as in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, terror plays a central role in interpreting revolution, yet it is conceived in the spirit of a Heideggerian “being-toward-death.” The relation between Master and Slave begins with fear of death, and it is destroyed by fear of death in the face of revolutionary terror. In this article, Kojève’s philosophy converges with the various versions of “left Nietzscheanism,” which were particularly widespread in prerevolutionary Russia.

Keywords Phenomenology · Nietzsche · Philosophy of history · Master/Slave · Revolution · Terror

Alexandre Kojève wrote practically nothing about the revolution in Russia, although he often spoke to the attendees of his lectures about the French Revolution. The theme of revolutionary terror occupies a particular place in Kojève’s interpretation of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Vincent Descombes even referred to his interpretation in general as a “terrorist conception of history” (Descombes 2000). Kojève had personal experience of it: his stepfather (whom he refers to, in correspondence with his uncle Wassily Kandinsky, as his “father”) was killed in 1917 by peasants who were robbing his estate, and Kojève himself spent three days during the Red Terror in death row at Cheka headquarters, expecting death by firing squad. To this one could be added

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the experience of his arrival in Germany at a time when, from 1919 to the end of 1923, armed resistance occurred among elements of the Civil War, including terrorism. Of course, terrorism existed among the Whites in Russia, as well as right-wing terrorism in Germany (the murder of ministers Erzberger and Rathenau, Luxemburg and Liebknecht, Eisler, as well as hundreds of leftists), yet the scope of the revolutionary terror was of a far wider scope, insofar as the justifications for annihilation were “social class” or the “reactionary nature” of those whom they took prisoner and executed. The revolutionary “enlighteners” always hated country “bigots”: villagers of the Vendée were systematically eradicated by Jacobins through the poisoning of wells, whereas peasants of the Tambov region were poisoned by the Bolsheviks with mustard gas. Throughout his life, Kojève was convinced that there were no peaceful revolutions: Raymond Aron recounted remarks from one of their final conversations, in which Kojève described the events of May ‘68 as a mere buffoonery and nuisance—it was by no means a revolution, as there was no blood shed.

When discussing the French Revolution and Napoleon in his lectures from 1933 to 1939, Kojève had in mind events in Russia. The clash between the “old order,” with its Masters, and the worker Slaves corresponded for him more with the images of pre-revolutionary Russian journalism than with the wigged aristocrats and French bourgeoisie of the end of the eighteenth century. Behind the figure of a revolutionary emperor Napoleon in his lectures, there exists, however secretly or openly, the figure of Stalin, with his plans for the “building of socialism in one country,” his five-year plans, collectivization, and terror.

While Kojève was delivering his lectures on an *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, a civil war had begun in Spain, the Great Purge had taken place in the USSR, and Hitler was in power in Germany. To borrow Ernst Nolte’s phrase (Nolte 1963), an initial “European civil war” had transformed into a world one; those very same years also witnessed the Long March of Chinese communists. A battle waged, between those who emblazoned red banners with the phrase “We are not slaves” and those who desired world rule of a “master race,” which was uncompromising and required taking sides. A trace of this era can be felt in reading the text of Kojève’s lectures. History began with the appearance of Master and Slave, and it is now passing through a phase of revolution that leads to the “universal and homogeneous empire,” one that had once been named “the kingdom of labor”¹ by the battle’s participants. Kojève’s view on the era can be summarized as the following: we live in a time of wars between national states and class struggle within these same states, that is, Kojève (following Carl Schmitt) saw *politics* as the relationship between friend and enemy; it should be succeeded by *legal right* that combines aristocratic equality and bourgeois equivalency in a *Rechtsstaat* that knows no borders.² Revolution, with all of its cruelties, occupies a place in history as humanity’s transition from one condition to another, as a decisive place insofar as history as such concludes with it.

The concept of revolution is speculative and can even be called a philosophical idea. For as long as states have existed, people have known unrest, revolts, and up-

¹ Stalin frequently referred to communism’s waging of war for a “kingdom of labor,” one founded on earth in contrast to the “heavenly kingdom” described in religious teleology.

² Kojève writes about this in *Outline of a Phenomenology of Right* in 1943, while a member of the French Resistance.

risings, yet the transformation of the initially astronomical term into a political one, with an entirely opposite meaning, took place a little more than two centuries ago. One could say that de Liancourt's response to King Louis XVI in 1789 served to distinguish one historical phenomenon from all those that had preceded it: "Is it a revolt? – No, sire, it is a revolution!" Although the word was already used with regard to political changes, in the case of the English Glorious Revolution it still referred to a return to previous liberties and customs rather than a split with all prior history.

For "classical" political theory, dating back to antiquity, people have organized in communities in pursuit of a good life, yet frequently this goal was contradicted by the self-interested goals of either individuals or groups, leading to disorder and rebellion. Beginning with Solon's "Eunomia," for hundreds of years one finds texts in which the coexistence of different peoples corresponds to a cosmic harmony, an eternal celestial order, and historical changes are not taken into account. Though we have long moved away from this type of "classics," heirs to this tradition remain to this day. Such figures include conservatives such as Roger Scruton, or the adherents of "republicanism," who challenge the basic foundation of liberal democracy. One significant example here is Leo Strauss, whose polemic with Kojève on politics is rooted in ontology and philosophy of history, a debate between a Platonist and a Hegelian.

The concept of revolution is an integral part of any philosophy of history that carries out a de-secularization of Christian eschatology, or teleological history. A cyclical model of events is replaced by a rising, straight line, and the concept of development, borrowed from biology, is combined with the concept of progress, i.e., a movement upward in steps (*progradatio*). Development presupposes the presence of a developing organism, which becomes humanity. Anything that impedes progress is subject to negation. A slow evolution or unsuccessful reforms are sometimes viewed as insufficient, and a "break with gradualism" is necessary, which becomes revolution.

An endless number of monographs and dissertations, articles and pamphlets, party platforms, and flyers have been written on the subject of political revolution, to which one could add "industrial," "scientific," "national liberation," "sexual," and other such revolutions. All discourse of this sort is united by a view of history as a continuum, in which there are dramatic breaks that allow for a transition to a higher stage. On each occasion, it is a question of a battle between the old and the new, and the assessment is unambiguous: the new is beneficial, rejecting outdated institutions, inequality, oppression, and prejudices. Political action is integrated into a historical process that transcends the political, as such breaks with the past serve as steps in the uninterrupted progression of humanity toward a better future.

Georges Danton famously said that revolutions begin in the minds and only later pour out onto the streets. Radicalism in politics is a consequence of radicalism in thought. Revolutionary consciousness presupposes the rejection of the past, resorting to long-standing philosophical metaphors, such as a *tabula rasa*, even in hymns: "Du passé nous faisons table rase," as it is sung in *The Internationale*. No longer merely rebelling against a given king and his favorites; revolution cancels every previous system, following a pre-conceived plan. After a revolt, all preceding history is reconceived as its preparation. A giant historiography is crafted in which Spartacus's slave

rebellion, the Yellow Turban rebellion in China, the Jacquerie, and *pugachevshchina* belong to a narrative of “emancipation,” of the war of Slave against Master. Kojève’s view of revolution fits into such a philosophy of history, which moreover he equates with Hegel’s own views.

The interpretation of Hegel

Kojève delivered his lectures to a young, ambitious French audience, the majority of which had not read Hegel, could not read German, and belonged to no particular revolutionary political party. They lacked access to Hegel’s major texts, which had either generally not been translated into French or had been so badly edited by the Italian Augusto Vera that no one could understand them. Also missing was an academic tradition of interpretation: Hegel was, essentially, not read by French professors of philosophy, in contrast to, for example, Kant. The only exceptional work on Hegel, published shortly before Kojève delivered his lectures, was Jean Wahl’s *Le malheur de la conscience dans la Philosophie de Hegel* (1929), but the book, written in the wake of both Dilthey’s *Young Hegel* as well as Kierkegaard’s clear interest in interpreting the early stages of the German philosopher’s work as a variation of romanticism, hardly clarified the meaning of Kojève’s lectures. Attendees lacked the ability to juxtapose Kojève’s interpretation with a primary source: the first adequate translation of *Phenomenology of Spirit* would be made by Jean Hyppolite, who attended the lectures, yet it would appear only after the Second World War. No one doubted that the key to all of Hegelian philosophy was his meeting with Napoleon (the “world spirit”) in October 1806. The fact, moreover, that the French Revolution was a turning point in world history, that with the appearance of the Citizen the world of Masters and Slaves had passed, seemed to them entirely obvious, since this history was more or less taught to them in the collège and lycée of the Third Republic. A “Napoleonic myth” had likewise been preserved, and there were still alive those who remembered the days of the Second Empire of Louis Bonaparte. Even among the most conservative French politicians and literary figures, adverse to revolution, there was no uniformity: the nationalist Maurice Barrès disagreed with monarchist Charles Maurras, remembering his grandfather who had served as a corporal in the Grande Armée. Thanks to Kojève’s series of lectures at the École pratique, French intellectuals began to conceptualize their own revolution in the terms of a Hegelian philosophy of history. There were precursors to his interpretation.

Contesting interpretations of Hegel’s philosophy already appeared soon after the death of the thinker: his students are divided into those who became known as “Old Hegelians” and those who became “Young Hegelians.” The initial disputes were marked by Hegel’s philosophy of religion, but relatively quickly debates extended into the realm of politics, and for this reason the first group became “Right” Hegelians, and the second “Left” Hegelians. Without getting into the history of these debates, I will only recall that both Marxism and revolutionary anarchism were the offspring of an evolution of “Left” Hegelianism. Bakunin was a Hegelian when he wrote: “A passion for destruction is also a creative passion.”³ European varieties of

³A similarity between Kojève’s understanding of dialectics and Bakunin’s, in whose article “The Reaction in Germany” negation precludes any reconciliation of contradictions, can be extrapolated to one more

neo-Hegelianism more or less inherited these reference points. When Kojève wrote in his essay-review “Hegel, Marx, and Christianity” that in the Second World War “left” and “right” versions of Hegelianism were in conflict, he was recalling that Marxism represented the first and Fascism the second: Mussolini’s “doctrine of fascism” was written in Hegelian language, as Giovanni Gentile helped the Duce to write it. In Russia, Hegel attracted not only those who saw in dialectics the “algebra of revolution,”⁴ but also conservatives (and even “reactionaries”—let us recall Mikhail Katkov, who began as a Hegelian in the Stankevich circle), religious thinkers, down to Ivan Il’in, who expressed considerable sympathy for Italian fascism in the 1920s and 1930s. It is well known that in the interpretation both of Hegel’s philosophy in general, as well as of his political and legal views, there is broad disagreement. The differences do not necessarily coincide with party affiliation: from Rudolf Haym to Karl Popper, liberals accuse Hegel of being reactionary, yet this view was shared by Stalin, who saw in Hegel’s philosophy (as in the German romanticists) a conservative reaction to the Enlightenment and French Revolution. Just as heterogeneous are the interpretations of Hegelian thought as the pinnacle of “classic German philosophy,” which Engels, and Lenin after him, believed to be the most significant source of Marxism. The transformation of a rather conservative thinker into the prophet of proletarian revolution always clashed with the “strength of the material.” No less complicated was the task of presenting Hegel—even his *Philosophy of Right*—as an apologetic for the Prussian monarchy.

This “conflict of interpretations” also applies to the relationship of Hegel to the French Revolution and Napoleon. For some, youthful dances around a tree of liberty, together with Hölderlin and Schelling, gradually gave way to political realism, *Sachlichkeit*, and a sober view of parliamentary “prattle,”⁵ whereas Hegel himself became a Germanic nationalist. For others, even in his old age he remained an admirer not only of Napoleon, but of Jacobinism,⁶ whereas other interpreters believe that the philosopher himself influenced the decision of his brother to enlist as a volunteer in Napoleon’s army, setting off on a campaign to Moscow from which he wouldn’t return, vanished somewhere in the Russian snow. Attendees of Hegel’s course on the philosophy of history have given us a view of the French Revolution as “a magnificent rising sun,” the “reconciliation of the divine with the terrestrial,” yet it is

important point. Even in the period of his shift from Fichteanism to Hegel, the future founder of anarchism consistently emphasized that the transition to true existence in the light of the Absolute is possible only through suffering, despair, and self-negation, all taken to their limit. It is a question of a great leap, recalling not only Kierkegaard’s “fear and trembling” but also Heidegger’s *Angst*. Bakunin wrote about this in letters to his sisters, and there is evidence of it in recollections from contemporaries. Worldwide communist anarchy, of course, is different from a “universal and homogeneous empire,” but it is conceived just like an “end of history,” in which social classes, nations, and states clash.

⁴This phrase belongs to Herzen, who wrote in his memoirs: “Hegel’s philosophy is the algebra of revolution, it extraordinarily liberates man and leaves no stone unturned in the world of Christianity, in the world of traditions that have outlived their time” (Herzen 1956, p. 14).

⁵Hegel spoke of England as of a country in which beneficial laws “at the same time turn out to be the greatest lawlessness,” and where under the guise of discussion on freedoms “nowhere else can one find so few truly free institutions as in England;” “for them, both that one can sell one’s vote, and that one can buy a place in parliament, is called freedom.” See Hegel 2000, pp. 453–454.

⁶See, for example, an article from one of the greatest French Hegel scholars: Jacques D’Hondt (1989).

accompanied by an ironic assessment of the desire to subordinate reality to abstract principles (“man stood on his head,” Hegel 2000), something characteristic of many conservatives.

It is clear that Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel’s philosophy is embedded in a “left” tradition, which is generally marked by attention paid not to the absolute but to objective spirit, *Historicism*, a rejection of Hegel’s philosophy of nature. Of course, in the USSR, it was almost exclusively Engel’s version that was in circulation, in which historical materialism was propped up by a “dialectics of nature,” but the “revolutionary” method was opposed to Hegel’s “conservative” system. It makes sense to compare *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* not to the dogmatics of dialectical materialism, but instead to those interpretations of Hegel that begin with György Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* and continue with several theoreticians of the Frankfurt School (Herbert Marcuse’s *Reason and Revolution*). One is immediately struck, however, by differences between Kojève’s lectures and any Marxists, since the ontology, anthropology, and understanding of the very same dialectics are completely different. Dualism takes the place of panlogism, and pure negativity (*néantisation*) replaces a movement from thesis to antithesis and synthesis (“the negation of negation”), whereas the anthropology to which Kojève reduces the *Phenomenology of Spirit* bears traces of a reading of Nietzsche, Husserl,⁷ and, most notably, Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. Hegel is credited with doctrines that were created several decades later. Alexandre Koyré had presented an outline of such an interpretation of *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Hegel’s entire system in his article “Hegel at Jena,”⁸ published in 1934. Koyré, however, had simply gestured toward the aporias of his interpretation—the notion of identifying being with time, negativity as the essence of history, and the possibility of such a system of philosophical knowledge only if historical time had already stopped, all of which was destructive for Hegel’s system. Kojève takes up the interpretation of Hegel’s philosophy on the whole as a phenomenological anthropology and paradoxical historicism: there is neither a system of knowledge nor a rational view of history without a presumed *end of history*, and, since Hegel had already created this system, history had already ended.

A small section of *Phenomenology of Spirit* becomes the key to all of history: the battle of self-consciousnesses for recognition, which leads to the emergence of Master and Slave, becomes for Kojève “anthropogenic,” since in it the animal instinct for self-preservation is overcome: “in order to *realize itself* as human existence, man must be able to risk his own life for the sake of recognition. This risking of one’s life (*Wagen des Lebens*) is the true birth of man” (Kojève 1981). The overcoming a fear of death, by those who are prepared to battle and die, leads to the appearance of the figure of the Master; one can recall what Heraclitus once wrote about war making some masters and others slaves, Hobbes’s “war of all against all” (Hegel directly refers to it as a source of his “dialectic of master and slave” in *Phenomenology of Spirit*), and the fact that Nietzsche’s “will to power” initially had precisely the same meaning

⁷That Kojève was familiar with Ivan A. Il’in’s *The Philosophy of Hegel as a Doctrine of the Concreteness of God and Humanity* is not recorded in any available texts, but it is possible, given that Il’in brought together Hegel’s philosophy with Husserl’s phenomenology. Such a convergence had already been realized by Il’in in his early (1912) article “On the renaissance of Hegelianism”.

⁸The article was subsequently published in a collection of essays by Koyré (1971).

(*Selbstüberwindung*). Kojève's view of universal history stems from this anthropology, and thus it diverges from the philosophical and historical constructs in Hegel and Marx rooted in the Enlightenment. Freedom obtained through the self-discovery of the absolute idea is not a history of spirit, and even less is the movement of history linked to a logical transition from one formation to another, the Marxists' "base" and "superstructure." In his anthropology, there are clearly discernible traces of a reading of Nietzsche and his German heirs from the era of the Weimar Republic—from Schmitt and Heidegger, who exerted a direct influence on Kojève, to more presumptive figures, such as Ernst Jünger and Hans Freyer.⁹ One can say that the figure of the Master is presented by Kojève in Nietzschean terms, and the Slave in Marxist terms.

In Russia, in debates on *bogochelovechestvo* and *chelovekobozhestvo*, initially Feuerbach's ideas were considered, yet toward the beginning of the twentieth century he had been supplanted by Nietzsche, who in Russia at the time, in contrast to Germany, exerted an influence primarily on "left" political figures, including several Bolsheviks. This mostly applied, however, to Socialist Revolutionaries (SR), and not merely to such "practitioners" as Boris Savinkov, writer and head of terrorist "combat," but to those who turned to philosophy, as well. One might consider, as a predecessor to Kojève, Nikolai Dmitrievich Avksent'ev (1878–1943), one of the leaders of the SR party (on its right wing), who spoke out against terrorist tactics. He spent several months as Minister of Internal Affairs in the Provisional Government. Avksent'ev received a philosophical education in Germany and defended a dissertation (*Promotion*) on the topic of Nietzsche's doctrine of the superman. It was published in Russia as a small book entitled *Superman. Nietzsche's Cultural-Aesthetic Ideal* in 1906, in which Nietzsche is exalted as a philosopher and artist, a poet of the autonomous creative personality, yet he is also subjected to critique from a Kantian perspective, with an abundant citation not only of Kant but also Alois Riehl and Wilhelm Windelband. For our purposes, it is interesting that this dispute with Nietzsche is conducted on the topic of mastery and slavery. For Nietzsche, high culture is a pyramid, whose base is a mass of slaves and all sorts of commonness, and thus "out of necessity, two 'castes' are created, two classes of people: masters and slaves. Masters are the creators of a new high culture, and slaves are the necessary condition, the ground upon which masters are grown" (Avksent'ev 1906). Following a detailed presentation of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Avksent'ev attempts to illustrate that the connection between the ideal of an integral, independent personality and the Hellenic view of the inevitability of slavery is unjustified and even arbitrary, and that the concept of the will to power ("will to might" or "*volia k moshchi*" in Avksent'ev's work) "not only does not strengthen or explain the ideal... but rather distorts and contradicts it." Moreover, in his debate with Nietzsche, he expounds upon an idea that overlaps with the well-known passage of *Phenomenology of Spirit*: "One of the greatest factors in the victory of the slaves over the masters was the *development of consciousness*. Slaves made themselves *smarter* than masters." The future leader of

⁹One can juxtapose the image of the "slave-soldier" in Kojève, replacing the bourgeois type, with what Junger wrote in his essay *The Worker*; in Freyer's *Revolution from the Right*, one can find similar ideas on a revolutionary unity of people and state. There is also considerable overlap with the essays of Ernst Niekisch, who was moreover a Hegelian, but whom Kojève clearly did not read; several ideas "were in the air:"

the socialist party is of the view that the socialist ideal presupposes the expansion of aspects of aristocracy for all of humanity and indicates that revolution is necessary for this to happen. In a country where many privileges of the nobility had been preserved, and corporal punishment of peasants was only outlawed in 1904, mastery and slavery was a persistent topic in revolutionary publications. It was also common in the press for revolutionaries themselves to conceptualize their activity in the terminology of “left Nietzscheanism.”¹⁰

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, there are numerous complicated transitions from one *Gestalt* to another, such as when the relationship between master and slave is dialectically “sublated” into stoicism; for Kojève, this relationship remains unchanged throughout history.¹¹ Man is born in a fight not for life, but for death, and he disappears with its reconciliation. Kojève himself never gave an answer to the question of what the “end of history” means for man: sometimes it is a question of the Sage, sometimes of some semblance of a superman, sometimes of the “last man” and his return to an animal condition, and sometimes of *homo ludens*. In each instance, historical man living through conflict and labor disappears. *Der Mensch ist etwas, das überwunden werden soll*, wrote Nietzsche; it also recalls his image of a rope tied between ape and superman, along which man walks. Kojève’s thought has little to do with Marxist, or even generally socialist, dreams of a move from a “realm of necessity into a realm of freedom.” As Stefanos Geroulanos has correctly noted (2010), this idea can in no way be classified as humanist. If one recalls that Kojève began as a researcher and admirer of Buddhism, then with regards to the movement of history and its conclusion an image from the Lankāvatāra Sūtra emerges in his work: the winds of ignorance, stirring up waves of passion, fade away, and there remains only the mirrorlike surface of the ocean. However, until history has concluded, Kojève’s ontology and anthropology imply a steady flow of becoming, the destruction of all that had been, and a kind of “permanent revolution.”

Terror

It makes little sense to reproach Hegel, or even Kojève, for having not examined the socio-economic and political conditions of revolution—phenomenology deals with consciousness or self-consciousness and not social and class divisions, the state of finances or the struggle of elites for power. Although in the section “The certainty and truth of reason,” Hegel occasionally points to various social groups and outlines a link between modern philosophy and individualism; it is a clear exaggeration on Kojève’s part to state that the author of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* was undertaking a “critique of bourgeois individualism and liberalism” (Kojève 1947). The complicated transitions of this section are replaced by Kojève with a uniform history of the

¹⁰We find something similar in France a half-century later: *French Theory* (sic) in general, and in particular the work of Deleuze and Foucault, can also be seen as a variety of “left Nietzscheanism.”

¹¹It is true, at certain moments Kojève claims that masters cease to be as such: the Roman Optimates turn out to be slaves to the emperors, and medieval barons agree that they are “holy slaves.” Even the bourgeoisie is characterized as “slaves to capital,” until the moment has come for a “universal and homogeneous empire.”

bourgeois human type, represented in thought by the figure of the Intellectual. Commentary on the section “Self-alienated spirit; Culture,” in which Hegel also examines the Enlightenment, becomes for Kojève, as it does, indeed, for many historians, the threshold of the French Revolution. Given that we are interested in Kojève’s view of the Russian Revolution, I will not repeat all that has been written on how he understood the Enlightenment as preparation for revolution, and then the movement towards the empire of Napoleon.¹² We can merely say that in his interpretation, the view of intellectuals in the Enlightenment, moving from word to revolutionary deed, at least in part echoes a polemic underway in Russia with regard to the intelligentsia: first prior to the revolution (memorialized in the essay collection *Vekhi*) and later in emigration. Assessment of the role of the intelligentsia was varied and depended on the political views of those who assessed the results of the revolution. Some held views passed down from members of Narodnaia Volia to the Trudoviks and SRs, and in part to the Kadets and Mensheviks, whereas others begin to repeat, following Lenin, a teleology that led from the Decembrists to the Bolsheviks (“the Decembrists awakened Herzen,” etc.), and yet a third group were severely judgmental: “the ideology of the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia has scorched Russia, started a great fire and burnt itself in its own flames” (Il’in 1993, p. 179).

Kojève’s view on the figure of the Intellectual is disparaging: it is a poor bourgeois that desires to be rich. In portraying themselves as revolutionaries in thought, intellectuals are conformists, who wish to find for themselves recognition such as “talent” that might be traded and sold. The sole significance that remains for intellectuals in the preparation for revolution amounts to atheist propaganda, undermining prior convictions. This clearly does not apply to the Russian revolutionary intelligentsia in the last several decades of autocracy, however the assessment of the first months after revolution is characteristic, rather, of the state of the Provisionary Government in the spring and summer of 1917, or France from 1789 to 1792. Kojève formally follows Hegel, who wrote about the brief period in which “the indivisible substance of absolute freedom ascends the world throne, and no force is in a position to offer resistance” (Hegel 1959), yet he applies the speculative reflections to a political reality that more resembles Russia. The autocracy collapsed unexpectedly for all revolutionary parties, all possible rights and freedoms were proclaimed, yet they were devoid of content. Previous laws and conventions fell apart, all obligations disappeared, and individuals were entirely untethered from one another. Conflicting drafts of the constitution were proposed, yet it was just gibberish among individuals: “Man found himself in total emptiness. . . *Anyone* can desire the transformation of their own personal ideas into political reality, without being declared insane or a criminal” (Kojève 1947, p. 142). This corresponds to what Hegel wrote in his chapter “Absolute freedom and the Terror,” immediately following his overview of the Enlightenment. In speaking of absolute freedom, he refers directly to Rousseau’s doctrine of “general will;” this freedom “eliminates all social classes;” those “spiritual entities into which the whole is divided.” One single consciousness, belonging to one of the members, transcends all limitations, and “its goal is a general goal, its language is the common law, its work is the common work” (Hegel 1959, pp. 315–316). This is the revolutionary consciousness, above which only Robespierre’s “higher being” (*l’être suprême*)

¹²See Rutkevich 2017.

remains, mentioned only contemptuously by Hegel. This “general will” is not in a state, however, to realize anything positive, and thus “it remains for it only *negative action*; it is merely a *fury* of destruction.” Having divided into an absolute, disunited inertness for some and an inexorable, cold cruelty for others, having done away with any real organization, this freedom of each and all brings only death with it. The general will unites some as a *political party*, which comprises the government and wishes to express this will, persecuting those who have different ideas, yet this sets the stage for the death of the party itself. “To be under suspicion,” Hegel concludes in his excursion into the history of the French Revolution, “is the equivalent of being guilty,” and thus it is destroyed. In his lectures on the philosophy of history, Hegel further develops this view of revolution. Having toppled the monarchy, the republic cannot do without direction; in theory, this would be passed to the people, yet in practice it passes to the convention; abstract principles of freedom and their expression in subjective will, as virtue, rule. However, this virtue must govern those who, due to corruption, inertia, personal interests, and passion, are deprived of it. Suspicion reigns, and it acquires a terrifying force: “There now rules *virtue* and *terror*, as subjective virtue carries with it a terrifying tyranny. It realizes its power without judicial Forms and punishes just as simple—only by death.” Such is the “terrible progression of freedom” (Hegel 2000, p. 450).

Kojève follows Hegel in his discussion of the anarchy and long-windedness of revolutionary government, which lives in a void and is out of touch with reality. It is not in a position to realize anything positive, and no one will submit to it. This “nothingness” is itself subject to annihilation. A “war of all against all” is once more renewed, a battle for recognition. Absolute freedom inevitably gives birth to terror, since each revolutionary “in the name of Revolution” seeks to become dictator, impose one’s personal will that is passed off as “the general will.” In a battle of the parties and their leaders, the victorious party begins to rule, yet its rule inevitably occurs through violence. Presenting the party’s interests as general ones, a part (the party) turns to terror.

In Hegel, we do not find any thesis on the renewal of a fight for recognition, and he is missing a positive assessment of terror. For Kojève, terror allows for the realization that man himself is *nothing* [*nichto*]: “Only after such an experience does Man become truly ‘rational’ and can realize a Society (State) in which Freedom is actually possible” (Kojève 1947, p. 144). Fear of the “absolute Master, Death” compels private individuals to recognize a system in which they can all receive real freedom in this world as citizens. It is precisely terror that definitively shatters slavery and abolishes the very relationship of Master and Slave. A community of Citizens, in sublating this relationship, is born out of this deathly fear. The relationship of Master and Slave emerged out of such a fear, since the Slave was made out of one who preferred obedience to the will of the Master over death; from this fear there appears the bifurcated “unhappy consciousness.” Terror now suppresses self-will, and with the same horror founds a kingdom of Citizens, who recognize one another in a godless world. Such is the dialectic of “fear and trembling,” which hardly resembles Hegel’s version.

The French word *terreur*, as well as all other derivatives of the Latin *terrorem*, initially mean “fear,” “intimidation,” “frightening.” Romans were intimidated by violence in times of Sulla, Tiberius, or Domitian. Terror acquired new traits with revolutionary violence: desirous of overthrowing the ruling class, revolutionaries use

terrorist acts, and, having attained power, they extend terror from actual enemies to potential opponents. But, very soon, terror overtakes those who unleashed it. Such negation of negation Hegel named “the fury of destruction.”

The revolutionary terror to which the Jacobins and Bolsheviks resorted receives a “dialectical” justification with a clear hint of Heidegger’s “being-toward-death” that evokes “authenticity.” This is not, of course, a justification of the guillotine for some and the execution of hundreds of thousands of hostages taken from the “former people” during the Civil War in Russia. The philosopher’s speculation offers an understanding of past events and is not a prescription for future dictators. There is, however, in Kojève one further addition to Hegel’s contemplation of Gestalten from the past. In discussing how revolutionary terror turns not toward its direct enemies, the heirs of the *ancien régime*, but instead to competing factions within the revolutionaries themselves, Kojève clearly did not have in mind Robespierre, Saint-Just, the Girondists sent to the guillotine, Danton, Desmoulins, or the leaders of “les Enragés.” Neither did he mean the fact that the Bolsheviks initially classified representatives of other socialist parties (the Mensheviks, the SRs, the Trudoviks, and the like) as “enemies of the people.” He delivered his seminars as the very leaders of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) were themselves made into political enemies, during the “Moscow show trials.” Far from all Russian émigrés condemned the trials: for a large number of them, justice had caught up to those who had pursued a policy of terror during the Civil War. Hardly could anyone in emigration mourn the fate of Béla Kun, who had supervised the execution of thousands of White Officers, who had remained in Crimea, or the “butcher of Petrograd,” Grigorii Zinov’ev. Yet for Kojève, the appearance of a single dictator and the execution of his potential competitors was the inevitable logic of history. Revolutionaries are “people of action,” rebels endowed with an excess of animal strength and unrest. Kojève applies to them the expression of “blonde beasts,” invented by Nietzsche for a different reason. Only “people who have achieved Revolution are not kept in power, precisely because they have remained (or it is believed that they have remained) the same as they were before the Revolution, namely non-conformists. . . such ‘blonde beasts’ are no less cattle than inert and passive animal-conformists.” They are incapable of creating a new society and thus are eliminated.

Revolutionary terror is completed by he who brings about new historical activity, a rule of mutually recognized Citizens. Kojève points to Hegel’s letter to Friedrich Niethammer, which describes a “world spirit” atop a horse in reference to their meeting the emperor in Jena: “Such was what Hegel had *discovered* as the *reality* of Napoleon, acting as an *erscheinender Gott*, as a real and living God that had appeared to man in the world” (Kojève 1947, p. 157). Of course, Hegel had no notion of a rule of a man-god or superman, and the Neo-Platonic’ “world soul” by no means implied such a personification. If we correlate these judgments with the period during which Kojève delivered his lectures, then Kojève obviously was referring to Stalin. He even referred to himself as a “Stalinist,” although his close acquaintances recall that in his private views on the Stalinist USSR he was not much different from most émigrés. As Aron, who knew Kojève for more than thirty years, wrote in his memoirs, the latter remained “no matter what a White Russian émigré,” who recognized the historical significance of Russian communism but who professed little sympathy for

the empirical reality of the USSR. “That Russia, repainted red, was ruled by swine, that the very Russian language was becoming base, that culture was in decline—all of this he privately didn’t deny. On the contrary, he occasionally spoke of it as something taken for granted—only complete fools could ignore it. To repeat this over and over again is only necessary for those who associate with such fools” (Aron 1983, p. 131). Those who write on “Stalinism” today mostly use this word in the sense that it obtained in 1950s, in theories of “totalitarianism” (in the West) or “cult of personality” (in the USSR).¹³ But in the middle of 1930s, it had another meaning: “Stalinism” (“the building of socialism in one country”) was opposed to “Trotskyism” (“permanent revolution,” “world revolution”). It wasn’t the opposition of two leaders, as Trotsky had no serious influence in Bolshevik party; the real struggle was with the “left opposition,” headed by Zinoviev (leader of the Leningrad party organization and head of Comintern). Having triumphed in this intraparty struggle, they would have massacred their opponents no less severely, and with the same methods. Kojève’s “Stalinism” has nothing to do with support for “totalitarianism,” nor for the faction of Bolshevik party, but is a Hegelian interpretation of the outcome of revolution. In the same way that Napoleon’s empire was the dialectical result (*Aufheben*) of the French revolution, in Soviet Russia he saw the empire as a “synthesis” of the *ancien régime* (thesis) and revolutionary negation (antithesis).

Just as the ancient empires—from Sargon of Akkad to Octavian—emerged as a result of civil wars and mutual destruction, so too can the final Empire, a “universal and homogeneous state,” not do without terror. For those examining history, if not *sub specie aeternitatis*, then at least from the imagined point of its completion—and such a view was inherent in Hegel (or at least ascribed to him by Kojève)—proscriptions and executions have always existed; all that is important are their historical consequences. Leo Strauss, not without good reason, noted (1997) that Kojève, following Hegel, attempted to combine in political philosophy Socrates and Machiavelli. Essentially, Kojève’s view hardly differed from all of the “witnesses of progress,” who approved carpet bombings and the spraying of poison across millions of hectares in the name of an ascent “ever higher and higher.” Presumably, they could condemn Kojève for having chosen as an example of such movement, which they consider to be on the “wrong side.”

One can agree with Descombes’s characterization taken up at the beginning of the article: we are dealing with a “terrorist conception of history.” Kojève moved away from it in a text written in Russian from the end of 1940 to the beginning of 1941, “Sophia, philo-sophia, phenomenology.” Only a quarter of it has been transcribed, and only a portion of the transcription published (Kojève 2021), yet it is the only work in which he directly discusses the experience of the Russian Revolution. However, when he addresses in it propaganda slogans from the 1918–1920s on “the con-

¹³Even more banal are the fancies of some interpreters, who reduce the philosophy of Kojève to vanity, the aim of becoming famous, etc. That is why he wrote his “letter to Stalin” and subsequent “letter to Petain.” See Weslati 2014. For such “radical philosophers,” such a *jeu à la baisse* is natural, as well as the decoding of all motives as an ambitious urge for notoriety. But if we have a minimal knowledge of Kojève’s biography, it is not difficult to see that those strategies of self-promotion, typical for inheritors of Sartre and Lacan, were completely alien to Kojève. His squeamish scorn toward the “left intellectuals” originated from the estimation of “radicalism” and “revolutionary” prattle, having only one aim of being famous in *république des lettres*.

scious worker,” the “conscious woman,” etc., this is only to recount in an accessible language the “Universal self-consciousness” section of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Spirit*, in which the latter offers an entirely different version of the relationship of Master and Slave than in the *Phenomenology*. The annulment of slavery (not necessarily revolutionary) leads to the liberation of the master,¹⁴ yet whereas Hegel speaks here of an initial moment of civil society, Kojève describes the formation of a socialist one. This rhetoric of a “conscious citizen” greatly resembles the slogans of the SRs during the revolution. The memoirs of the aforementioned Avksent’ev are curious in this regard, in which it is clear to what extent, in the period from February to October in 1917, the vocabulary of the right-wing SRs recalled the invocations of the Jacobins in 1793, whereas the Bolshevik “Defeatists” in every possible way undermined the army.

It is noteworthy that in this manuscript there is no mention of terror, nor of the fact that the “end of history” had already arrived. Hegel was incorrect in considering it to have already come; he had merely anticipated it. History had not concluded, and subsequent conflicts and revolutions are inevitable. After each, a dialectical “sublation” occurs of the previous oppositions, which are reconciled in a new synthesis. The USSR of this period of time is no exception, since the course of history continues—it will at one point be replaced by a different social order, possibly through revolution. In this manuscript Kojève more closely approaches Marxism, yet his subsequent major work, *Outline of a Phenomenology of Right* (1943), illustrates that his “universal and homogenous state” more resembles the proposals of German Katheder-Socialists (“juridical socialism”) rather than those of the Bolsheviks.

In conclusion, it is worth briefly juxtaposing this vision of revolution with the views of those compatriots, who, like Kojève, positively viewed not only February but also October of 1917. In Berlin and Paris, Kojève came across thinkers who had both left and were expelled on the “Philosophers’ Steamers” in 1922. For the most part, they were heirs to a former, pre-revolutionary religious philosophy, and in no way accepted the established order in their homeland. From monarchists to Mensheviks and SRs, the Bolshevik seizure of power was seen as a criminal turn of events. There were, however, those who viewed the revolution differently. These were the *smenovekhovstvo* and *evraziistvo* movements, which raised heated debates among émigrés—Kojève could not fail to have noticed them, and he even briefly collaborated with the Eurasianists (he wrote a review of a book on Chinese thought for their publication) and was a friend of Lev Karsavin, who, of course, had at that time already moved away from Eurasianism.

Both groups considered revolution logical and even productive. The Eurasianists, however, were the heirs of Danilevskii and preached the existence of a unique Russian civilization distinct from the West; their philosophy of history was clearly closer to Spengler and Toynbee than to Hegel. The Bolsheviks had eliminated Peter’s legacy, returned Russia to itself, wresting it from “Western” captivity. Successors to the Eurasianism of Trubetskoi and Savinskii exist to this day in Russia, yet their philosophy of history is in the deepest sense opposed to both Hegelianism and Marxism.

¹⁴See Hegel 1956, p. 227. Of course, this state of general freedom is still a “forcible division of spirit into different selves;” monads which are impenetrable and oppose one another.

The leading ideologue of *smenovekhovstvo*, Nikolai Ustrialov, was an original philosopher of legal right, and moreover a Hegelian, regularly referring to the “cunning of reason” in history. In politics, he began as a right-wing cadet and garnered fame during the First World War for articles that claimed Russia’s right to great power imperialism,¹⁵ yet his first serious philosophical work was devoted to a critique of Slavophilism. His “National Bolshevism” in the 1920s reconciled émigrés to the revolution: the “Red” authorities had managed to preserve the territorial integrity of Russia and rouse huge masses to historical activity. Over time, the communist project will lose its ideological intolerance and will be transformed under the pressure of pragmatic needs, yet it will remain a great world power. In other words, it is a “right Hegelianism,” in which revolutionary chaos itself is denounced and a class division of society is assumed to be the norm. Having achieved revolution, the Bolshevik party quickly began to transform into a new aristocracy, something that was welcomed by Ustrialov. In contrast to the Eurasianists, who were distant descendants of the Slavophiles, Ustrialov’s position was openly “occidentalist,” which corresponded, contrary to the dreams of the Eurasianists, to the politics of the Bolsheviks. Suffice it to recall Lenin’s characteristic statement in his article “The Tax in Kind,” in which he called for focusing on state capitalism, the German planned model for a war-time economy, and “not to spare dictatorial methods in order to accelerate this adoption of Westernism by barbarian Russia, not stopping at barbaric means for the struggle against barbarism” (Lenin 1967, p. 211). It is clear that such a project, subsequently implemented by Stalin, had only a distant relationship to the ideas of nineteenth-century socialists for “free associations of laborers.”

It is unlikely that Kojève followed the debates in 1920s Moscow, which developed into a struggler among leaders for the leadership of the party. Of course, one could juxtapose his views with the views of the Russian “left opposition,” with the “philosophy of equality” that the leader of this opposition, Zinov’ev, in his struggle with NEP called for in his pamphlet “Philosophy of the Era,” yet such comparisons would be a stretch. In his lectures, Kojève speaks once of a “betrayed revolution,” without mentioning Trotsky, who had by then published a book under the same name, and Kojève’s attitude toward this circle of ideas is clearly negative. We also have no evidence that he was even slightly familiar with the discussions concerning the October Revolution then underway in Soviet Russia and Weimar Germany.

Kojève had practically no influence on Russian émigré thought. On the other hand, post-war discussions about the revolution in France were dominated by his interpretation of Hegel, and this concerns not only the circle around the journal *Les Temps Modernes* (Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and others) but also their opponents, such as Camus, who began his essay *The Rebel* with a Slave rising from his knees and challenging his Master. The impact of Kojève’s interpretation of *Phenomenology of Spirit* on post-war French *maîtres-penseurs*, however, is another story entirely.

Declarations

Competing Interests The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

¹⁵See, for example, Ustrialov 1916.

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