

## Dossier: Kojève on Europe and the USSR

# Kojève out of Eurasia

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Accusations of Stalinism have long followed the philosopher Alexandre Kojève. In his influential seminars on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, held in Paris in the 1930s, Kojève had claimed that Hegel saw Napoleon as the embodiment of the universal state, as a reflection of the completed circularity of his philosophical system of knowledge at the end of history.<sup>1</sup> Throughout his career, Kojève would regularly draw parallels to a similar relationship between his own philosophy and Stalin, defining himself as a '*Marxiste de droite*' and viewing Stalinism as another form of the homogeneous, post-historical state.<sup>2</sup> Robert Marjolin, an early advocate for European integration who had recruited Kojève for work in the post-war French government, wrote in his memoirs that, in his later years, the philosopher-turned-bureaucrat would frequently describe himself as 'Stalin's conscience', yet Marjolin and his colleagues merely interpreted it as a frequent joke or provocation by Kojève, meant to *épater les bourgeois*.<sup>3</sup>

The claim began to be taken more seriously, however, in 1999, when Vasilii Mitrokhin, former archivist for the KGB who defected in 1991, published extensive material on various Soviet intelligence operations that had been conducted in the West. Among them was the claim of the existence of a 'white Russian' philosopher in France who served as a Soviet contact during the Cold War. According to Raymond Nart, French intelligence services had been tracking Kojève since World War II, yet the release of the Mitrokhin material has since allowed those suspicious of Kojève to 'concretise a simple intuition'.<sup>4</sup> In RP 184, Hager Weslati furthermore outlined the contents of an unsent letter by Kojève to Stalin, found

in his archive at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, where the philosopher sought to send the Soviet leader a translated version of his Hegel seminars – collaborating evidence includes the Russo-French photographer Evgeny Reis (known in French as Eugène Rubin), who briefly shared an apartment with Kojève in Paris and alleged that Kojève sought to express *philosophically* what Stalin had achieved politically.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond the seemingly perpetual need to pin down Kojève as a KGB agent, tangential to these debates over Kojève's relationship to the Soviet Union has been the growing question of what role his own Russian identity played in his life and work. Born Aleksandr Kozhevnikov in Moscow in 1902, Kojève emigrated to the West in 1920, first settling in Heidelberg to study philosophy before relocating to Paris in 1926. In Heidelberg Kojève wrote his dissertation on the Russian Orthodox philosopher Vladimir Solov'ev, and although Kojève quickly developed his reputation amongst French philosophers, his earliest works, including *Atheism* (recently translated into English<sup>6</sup>), were written in Russian. These works were generally well received by his Russian émigré reading audience – his collected papers include congratulatory notes for his first article on Solov'ev as well as an invitation from Orthodox theologian Georges Florovsky to join the Russian Society in Paris. Among the attendees of his famous seminars on Hegel were various Russian émigrés, including beloved poet Boris Poplavsky and Raisa Tarr, an influential organiser of literary events and good friend to Véra Nabokov.<sup>7</sup>

While it would be possible to attribute this new interest in 'Russian' Kojève to an appeal to exoticism,

flamed on by a penny press need for a new Cold War scandal and Kojève's own early interest in Eastern philosophy, it is worth noting the extent to which Russian philosophy itself has sought a return of émigré thinkers to its canon since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia in the 1990s witnessed a surge in the publication of philosophers writing from abroad who had previously been available only clandestinely in the Soviet Union: in her book *The End of Russian Philosophy*, Alyssa DeBlasio outlines the philosophical boom of the immediate post-Soviet period, noting that in 1993 there were more active philosophy journals in Russia than at any other point in Russo-Soviet history.<sup>8</sup> These new journals formally re-introduced a Russian-reading audience to thinkers who had been exiled from the Soviet Union in the early twentieth century, many (if not all!) of whom were religious philosophers who populated the émigré communities in Western Europe frequented by Kojève. To complicate matters, this re-acquaintance with non-Soviet Russian philosophy coincided with the equally new publication of Western theorists and philosophers, whose views may have been sympathetic to Marxist thought but had not been deemed suitable for print in Soviet press. Thus, figures such as Louis Althusser and Georges Bataille were first published in Russia side-by-side with Nikolai Berdiaev, Lev Shestov, and other members of the philosophical diaspora.<sup>9</sup> As a philosopher with allegiances to both groups, Kojève joins others like Emmanuel Levinas and Alexandre Koyré, whose combined emigration from the Russian Empire and continuing relevance to continental philosophy have made their reconstruction within the canon of Russian intellectual history an ongoing scholarly project to situate Russian thought within a larger, global network.

This return to the early Kojève and his connection with Russian thought thus reflects a need both to re-frame the history of Russian philosophy after the Soviet collapse as well as to do proper justice to those Russian philosophers who worked abroad but did not adhere to the often-monolithic moniker of émigré philosophy as 'anti-Soviet'. The following two essays in this issue, which are published in *Radical Philosophy* for the first time, and which constitute some of his earliest work and were written by Kojève when he still went by Kozhevnikov, position the burgeoning philosopher within the politically complicated milieu of Russian Paris on his own

terms. The essays were published in 1929 in the Parisian journal *Eurasia (Evraziia)*, which, as its name suggests, was an influential outlet for the Eurasianism movement in Russian diaspora.

Founded in Sofia in 1920, Eurasianism proclaimed the collapse of the 'Old World' of the West and the affirmation of the 'spiritual East' as a new global hegemon, embodied in the geo-cultural bridge of the Eurasian land-mass. The Eurasianist ideology quickly spread throughout Russian émigré communities, reaching from Harbin to Western Europe, yet by 1926 Paris became the centre of the movement as well as of the Russian émigré community more broadly. *Eurasia* was founded in 1928 by Lev Karsavin, a well-known émigré philosopher and close friend to Kojève: through Karsavin, Kojève would eventually meet his partner Nina Ivanoff, who was a friend of Karsavin's daughter.<sup>10</sup> Karsavin had founded the journal to reflect a growing left-wing of Eurasianists who came to support the Soviet regime by reconciling belief in the unique spiritual worth of Russia (as the 'unifier' of East and West) with the unique political project of communism. *Eurasia's* editorial approach generally supported an open line of communication between the Bolsheviks and the Russian community abroad, with its contributors regularly juxtaposing Russian religious philosophers such as Nikolai Fedorov and Solov'ev with the work of Marx and Lenin.<sup>11</sup>

Kojève's early essays therefore allow us to orient the philosopher within a larger rift emerging between political factions within the Russian diaspora in the 1920s, namely between those who sought to make peace with the transformational cultural politics in the Soviet Union and those who instead wished to preserve a pre-Soviet Russian intellectual life abroad, in defiance of the Bolsheviks. Left Eurasianists were not alone in trying to build a bridge with the Soviet Union: the *Smenovekhovtsy* or 'Milestone changers', a group founded in Prague in 1921 and often cited as an antecedent to National Bolshevism, likewise sought continuity with both Russian nationalist exceptionalism and the Soviet experiment, even receiving money from the Soviet government to fund their publications abroad.<sup>12</sup> In his most recent piece on Kojève as an alleged spy, Nart claims Kojève colluded in particular with the Union of Russian Patriots, which was yet another similar diaspora organisation with links to the French Communist Party that participated

in the French Resistance during World War II.

Although it hardly seems Kojève held any nationalist sentiment toward Russia, his first article in *Eurasia*, 'Philosophy and the Communist Party' (March 1929), included in this issue of *Radical Philosophy*, agrees with the Left Eurasianists and Smenovekhovtsy in viewing the Soviet Union as a positive experiment for politics and, in particular, for philosophy. Contrary to the opinion of most of his peers in the diaspora, many of whom had been exiled precisely due to these policies, Kojève views Soviet censorship as a chance to free oneself from the bondage of the European tradition, which had stagnated after Hegel and had since reached an impasse. He therefore argues that 'one can nevertheless welcome "philosophical politics" leading to the complete prohibition of the study of philosophy' as a means of developing a revolutionary, new system of thought. This argument later finds echo in his philosophy of wisdom, a similarly revolutionary form of post-historical consciousness based in a belief in the unification of humankind in the undertaking of shared action and contrasted to philosophy as a historically embedded process – as Boris Groys describes it, rather than the desire for knowledge across history, wisdom for Kojève was a post-coital satisfaction with readily available knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

Kojève's positive assessment of the Soviet censorship of philosophy was not without provocation, and, in a later issue of *Eurasia*, Karsavin assured readers that Kojève's article did not 'endorse censorship and violence' but rather sought to find a positive aspect of the new Soviet policies. Karsavin further criticised directly Kojève's claim that banning European philosophy in the USSR will somehow permit a new Russian philosophy, given that the philosophers endorsed by the Soviet canon (Marx, Engels, Hegel) were of the same European origin as those they replaced. Given the political stakes of the diaspora, estranged from their cultural and political institutions, one might expect that Kojève's earliest endorsement of Soviet policies is translated through the lens of Russian national identity, calling on the diaspora to accept 'the appearance of a truly new culture and philosophy, ... because it is neither eastern nor western but Eurasian, or simply because it will be new and alive, in contrast to the already crystallized and expired cultures of West and East.' Debates within the Russian diaspora on the phenomenon of communism were often difficult

to divorce from broader questions of the essence of the Russian nation, spurred on by the widespread popularity of both geopolitical conceptions of Eurasia as 'the heartland' and pivot of Great Game politics (as sketched in Halford Mackinder's famous essay from 1904), as well as Oswald Spengler's organicist conception of cultures' rise and decline in *The Decline of the West* (1923).

This geopolitical dimension of the early Kojève comes more clearly to the fore in his second article in *Eurasia*, 'Toward an Assessment of Modernity', published several months later, in September 1929, and also included in this issue of *Radical Philosophy*. There Kojève outlines the collapse of European hegemony following the First World War and a growing global opposition between the United States and the Soviet Union as propagators of capitalism and revolution, respectively. He bemoans the inability of Europe's multinationalism to unite under a single European state culture, due to the power wielded by capital and financial institutions over the 'Americanophile' continent. Forced to choose between capitalism and revolution, Kojève clearly prefers the latter, claiming that 'the victory of the second would offer [Europe] the chance to realise its unity in federal forms acceptable to each of its parts, and, alone, could return to Europe a worthy and leading place in the ranks of humanity.' A victory of capitalism would ensure Europe's enslavement to capital, whereas a victorious revolution in Europe would allow for the formation of a new and vibrant culture to replace its former stagnation – not unlike what Stalin had done for philosophy in the USSR.

These beliefs contradict Kojève's well-known later political writings, however, in which his views seem to become more moderate, both 'endorsing' the American way of life as well as efforts toward a more liberal political integration of the European continent. In a now widely cited footnote to his Hegel seminars, added in 1948, Kojève went so far as to claim that the United States, and not the USSR, had already attained the final stage of communism, 'given that practically all the members of a "classless society" can acquire for themselves everything that they like, without working any more than they feel like.'<sup>14</sup> In his post-war years at the French Ministry of Finance, Kojève helped to negotiate the reduction of trade tariffs between European nations in the implantation of the Marshall Plan and offered advice to Charles de Gaulle on a French foreign policy that would resist pressure

from the American and Soviet superpowers. Written in 1945, Kojève's memo to de Gaulle was entitled 'The Latin Empire'. In it, Kojève argued that France should strategically construct its own empire based on the cultural traditions of the Latin world. Whereas the Germano-Anglo-Saxon world was based in Protestantism, and the Soviet sphere 'increasingly on Orthodoxy', France could unify the Mediterranean countries, including its Maghreb colonial possessions, in the pursuit of an empire driven by Catholicism.

It would be unjust to insist on philosophical or political uniformity across an individual's life, as views and people change over time, yet from his earliest writings within the Russian diaspora, one can already see Kojève searching for a philosophical system based in revolutionary thinking and the creation of the new. As his work matured, leaving behind both his Russian peers and his native tongue, the direct grounding of this system in Eurasia clearly faded, allowing Kojève instead to articulate the universal philosophical system for which he is now best known and which is devoid of any national affiliation, Russian or otherwise. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that 'revolution' meant for Kojève the Russian revolutions, and that the momentous political changes that compelled him to leave his homeland informed his own philosophy of history and his attempt to produce a post-historical system of knowledge. As for Kojève's relationship to Stalinism, his personal views on Stalin, long taken in jest by his Western peers, are best understood as a clear reflection of the complicated political orientations then operative among the exiled Russian intelligentsia, in which the success of the Soviet project meant more than merely the success of communism. Instead of second-hand guesswork, vague reports from foreign intelligence and a dismissal of his political views as ironic self-indulgence, it may instead be worth taking Kojève at his word.

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## Notes

1. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), 338–9.
2. The quote comes from Dominique Auffret's biography, *Alexandre Kojève. La philosophie, l'État, et la fin de l'Histoire* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1990), 304.
3. Robert Marjolin, *Le travail d'une vie. Mémoires 1911-1986* (Paris: Robert Lafont, 1986), 57–8.
4. Raymond Nart, 'Alexandre Kojève dit Kojève: Un homme de l'ombre', *Commentaire*, 1.161 (2018), 224.
5. Hager Weslati, 'Kojève's Letter to Stalin', RP 184 (2014).
6. Alexandre Kojève, *Atheism*, trans. Jeff Love (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).
7. Dimitri Tokarev, 'Les Auditeurs russes "inaperçus" (Gordin, Tarr, Poplavskij) du séminaire hégélien d'Alexandre Kojève à L'École pratique des hautes études 1933–1939', *Revue des Etudes Slaves*, 88:3 (2017), 495–514.
8. Alyssa DeBlasio, *The End of Russian Philosophy* (London: Palgrave, 2014), 46–7.
9. Susan Buck-Morss describes her first-hand experience of this overlap between continental and Russian philosophy in *Dream-world and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000).
10. Although Karsavin was for years a major proponent of Eurasianism, he abandoned it in his later life. Karsavin eventually left France to teach in Lithuania, where he was arrested by the Soviets and died in a labour camp in 1952. See: S. S. Khoruzhii, 'Filosofia Karsavina v sud'bakh evropeiskoi mysli o lichnosti', *Lev Platonovich Karsavin* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2012), 79.
11. Antoine Arjakovsky provides a thorough overview of the Eurasianist movement, its politics and its journals in *The Way: Religious Thinkers of the Russian Emigration in Paris and their Journal, 1925–1940* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Uni Press, 2013), 117–21.
12. The *smenovekhovtsy* took their name from *Smena vekh* ('Changing milestones', 1921), a collection of essays published by the émigré community in Prague. The title of the collection is a reference to their rejection of the positions elaborated in the influential *Vekhi* ('Milestones', 1909), an earlier collection of essays where Russian philosophers, many of whom would be exiled after the revolution, publicly divorced themselves from Marxism and instead embraced an eclectic combination of Orthodox theology and liberalism. In 'changing the milestones', the *smenovekhovtsy* sought to reorient Russian philosophy again, this time in support of the Soviet Communist Party. See A. V. Kvakina, *Mezhdru belymi i krasnymi. Russkaia intelligentsiia 1920–1930 godov v poiskakh Tretiego Puti* (Moscow: Tsentopoligraf, 2006).
13. Boris Groys, *Introduction to Antiphilosophy* (London: Verso, 2012), 158. Groys claims furthermore than this vision of post-philosophical wisdom ought to be analysed precisely through the Russian philosophical tradition, which possesses a rich history of eschatological and apophatic thought.
14. Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, 510–11.