

GENNADII ALIAIEV
INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR, UKRAINE
E-MAIL: GEALYAEV@GMAIL.COM
ORCID: 0000-0001-6713-2014

Introduction to the Special Issue of *Studia z Historii Filozofii*

Since February 24, 2022, it became difficult, and sometimes even impossible, to speak of Russian philosophy. However, it depends on how one speaks of it. It has become much easier to accuse and discard it, to “cancel” and deliberately ignore its existence. The other camp, with no lesser ease, has turned Russian philosophy today into a kind of new ideologeme, made it a symbol of the struggle against the West (another victorious struggle!), transformed it into a kind of fundamental spiritual basis: not only uniting the people in the face of the enemy, but also containing answers to every possible questions of spiritual and – most importantly – socio-political existence.¹ However, it has become extremely difficult to talk about Russian philosophy as a phenomenon, from the standpoint of the history of philosophy, i.e., in the light and perspective of objective, unbiased critique.

On the other hand, discussions on the nature, meaning, and significance of Russian philosophy – including the questions of how far this philosophy is Russian or whether it is philosophy at all² – began not today, they have been

¹ A striking example of such an activity is the periodically renewed work of the “Russian Philosophical Council (Sobor)”.

² We have in mind Vladimir Solovyov’s famous remark about Russian philosophical work: “everything philosophical in them is not Russian at all, and what is Russian in them does not resemble philosophy at all, and sometimes it does not resemble anything at all”.

there and going on for decades. The current events – if one might forget for a moment the tragedy that is happening right now – might give a fresh start for rethinking these primordial statements of the discussions. They might begin a new epistemic stage of Russian philosophy as a phenomenon in the history of philosophy – both in identifying its authentic and genuine, rather than self-proclaimed, achievements and discoveries as well as, on the contrary, revealing its weaknesses, its secondariness and dependency. Certainly, as it has already been noted, the hot war provokes radical answers to the questions arising from such a rethinking. At any rate, it is no longer possible to examine this phenomenon disregarding the fact of this terrible war, ignoring the necessity of answering the questions of how this war became possible, and whether Russian philosophy (or, even broader, Russian culture itself) must assume any responsibility for it.

However, along with the discourse of assumed responsibility, there can also be another discourse – on those predictions and warnings, attempts to direct the course of events in a different direction or at least to outline the milestones of other paths that also took place in Russian philosophy. Peter Chaadaev and Alexander Herzen, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Vladimir Solovyov: this is certainly not a complete list of those who can be classified as “prophetic spirits”, who anticipated the things to come in their spiritual quintessence, and who will therefore remain the highly important spiritual guides to later generations.³ One can say, however, that, judging by the actual course of history, this prophetism has not fulfilled its historical mission, because it has not prevented the numerous catastrophes that befell Russia in the twentieth and, now, in the twenty-first century. Although when and where were prophets accepted in their own country? This discourse may anyway be a talk of weakness (in the sense of practical achievements) but not of wicked villainy.

It seems that this is exactly what the present issue of the journal is about. First of all, one may note the essay by Maria M. Przeciszewska. She begins her reflections by pointing to the fact that the intelligentsia in contemporary Russia is split: when some of them protest against the war and leave the country, being morally unable to accept the current political regime; others justify the

³ Thus Simon Frank wrote about Vladimir Solovyov – see Simon Frank (ed.), *A Solovyov Anthology* (London: S. C. M. Press, 1950), 28.

war and support or at least passively submit to the actions of the authorities aimed at establishing a rigid authoritarian regime. To understand the nature of this split, Przeworska suggests re-reading the famous collections “*Vekhi*” (“Landmarks”) and “*Iz glubiny*” (“Out of the Depth”), which seem very relevant today. More than a hundred years ago, “*Vekhi*” criticized the Russian intelligentsia for its nihilism with regard to law and the state – for the fact that it “was not interested in the law, criticizing its instrumental use by state power, but at the same time glorifying the ‘right of the people’ to limitless power” (Bogdan Kistyakovski). As a result, as the authors of the collection “*Iz glubiny*” argued, “the lack of respect for the law was the main reason of the collapse of the Russian state”. In this context, the collections of the early twentieth century turn out to be very relevant, because, “as in times of revolutionary chaos, the part of contemporary Russian intelligentsia is also distrustful of law, both civil and international, treating it simply as a tool of Western domination”. Another part is ready, following the example of the authors of “*Vekhi*”, who opposed revolutionary anarchy, to condemn Russian aggression against Ukraine.⁴ However, unfortunately, this is still a smaller part, and such manifestations, as the author of the essay rightly believes, “cannot be treated as a vote of the entire Russian intellectual elite against the government”.

One of the authors of the collections “*Vekhi*” and “*Iz glubiny*” was Simon Frank (his essay “*De profundis*” actually gave the title to the second collection). The subject of Gennadii Aliaiev’s essay is Frank’s concept of democracy, which is considered within the context of his spiritual evolution, as an integral part of the socio-political philosophy of liberal conservatism and Christian realism.

Thematically close to Gennadii Aliaiev’s essay is the one by Marek Jedliński that examines the concept of democracy of another famous Russian thinker – Nikolai Berdyaev, who also contributed to “*Vekhi*” and “*Iz glubiny*”. More specifically, Jedliński presents Berdyaev’s “reflections on democracy” that demonstrate

⁴ In addition to the collective letters mentioned by the author, which appeared at the beginning of the war, we should mention here the collection of essays “Facing the Catastrophe” (“*Pered licom katastrofy*”), recently published under the editorship of Nikolai Plotnikov in Germany. See also the review of this collection – “We are indeed experiencing a new stage in world history” – published in the T-Invariant online edition under the heading “Philosophers and Sociologists on War” (<https://www.t-invariant.org/2023/06/soyuz-tirana-s-sofistom-zhdut-tyazhelye-vremena-filosofy-i-sotsiologi-o-vojne/>).

“his aversion to democracy” and his “anti-democratic argumentation style”. The author emphasizes the contrast between spiritual aristocratism and democratic egalitarianism, which is characteristic of Berdyaev’s position. According to the Russian thinker, only spiritual aristocracy has inherent beauty, creativity and human freedom, while democracy kills all this, i.e., the human personality itself. According to Berdyaev, liberal democratic ideology, ignoring the depth of the human personality, is absolutely non-existent.

One might add that there is a certain apparent similarity between the views of Berdyaev and those of Frank in opposing aristocratism to egalitarianism; their views are also echoing Konstantin Leontiev’s ideas about the “blossoming complexity” and “secondary mixing simplification”. However, Frank does not reject the idea of democracy as such, but includes it into the complex ontological construction of society as the idea of “the service of all” (see Aliaiev’s essay). Berdyaev’s “metaphysics of democratism” is more unambiguously and directly opposed to aristocratism and personalism. As a result, one may find in the two philosophers substantially different conceptions of democracy, despite their apparent similarities. This difference was due to their different metaphysical positions. In a private letter, Frank wrote to Berdyaev that, on the one hand, he also believed that “creativity and freedom are more primordial and deeper than any ready-made being”. But on the other hand, Frank opposed “groundlessness”, rebellion, and individualism, explaining that “the creative personal spirit is conceivable to me only as an original member of the realm of spirits, which also implies its subordination to certain universal divine norms of being”.⁵

Returning to Marek Jedliński’s paper, we note that the author considers Berdyaev “a typical representative of twentieth-century traditionalist thought”, comparing his views with those of René Guénon and Julius Evola. Jedliński finds many parallels or even coincidences in the statements of the Russian philosopher and representatives of “Roman traditionalism” in their criticism and even condemnation of democracy. Eventually in Berdyaev’s eyes, according to the author, “democracy was an example of ‘metaphysical evil’”. This conclusion obviously determines the evaluation of Berdyaev’s political philosophy and its

⁵ S. Frank to N. Berdyaev, 6.12.1946, in Bakhmeteff Archive of Russian and East European History and Culture, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York. Nikolai Aleksandrovich Berdyaev Letters. Series I: Correspondence. Box 1. Frank, Simon Lyudvigovich.

positioning “within the context of Russia’s present war against democracy”. Although Jedliński states at the very beginning of his essay that he “will not make a simple analogy between the views on democracy of Russian thinkers (representing the Russian Religious-Philosophical Renaissance) and the anti-democratic attitudes of the contemporary Russian politicians”, the content of his essay rather justifies this analogy.⁶

Nikolai Berdyaev’s views – combined with the ideas of Fyodor Dostoevsky – are also the topic of Halina Rarot’s essay. The author considers the ideas of these thinkers within the context of “the question of the cultural sources of the declared ideology implementing the national idea (the idea of patriotism), guiding Russia’s attack on Ukraine”. At the same time, the author opposes the “popular position” that tends to see a direct connection between the ideas of Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy and Russian religious thinkers of the early twentieth century, on the one hand, and the justification of “the idea of a *Great* (and authoritarian) *Russia*” on which “Russian President Vladimir Putin eagerly relies”, on the other. Justifying her point, Halina Rarot analyzes a “certain thought-provoking split” that is found in Dostoevsky’s works – namely, in the difference between the ideological content of his journalistic works and diaries and his great novels. The author of the essay gives three explanations of this “split” known in critical literature and prefers the third – “it consists in seeing in Dostoevsky’s bifurcated worldview a strictly Russian binary thinking”, which “constantly balancing between these poles/positions, in this case between sympathy for anarchism and sympathy for authoritarianism”.

The author’s focus is not so much on the purely political preferences of Russian thinkers (e.g., anti-democratic or authoritarian leanings) as on their religious and eschatological expectations. Attitudes toward politics and the state in terms of these eschatological expectations may vary between a program of theocratic utopia and the radical-anarchist negation of the state. If in respect to Dostoevsky we are talking about the “thought-provoking split” and bifurcation of the worldview, then in the case of Berdyaev, the author of the paper relates such variations to the process of his creative evolution. It should

⁶ It should be noted in passing that Alexander Dugin, the leading ideologist of the current war, also positions himself as a Russian traditionalist, dedicating his latest book to the political traditionalism of Julius Evola.

be noted, however, that Halina Rarot does not accuse these thinkers of extreme utopianism leading to some form of earthly theocracy (“neither Dostoevsky nor Berdyaev can be accused of building an idea of a great Orthodox Russia with an authoritarian regime of power”). However, in the summing-up, it turns out that they preached – either simultaneously or in different periods of their work – different, sometimes opposite ideas. The nature of this “binary thinking” remains incompletely clarified in the essay. It seems that Halina Rarot is inclined to consider such thinking a characteristic feature of the Russian mentality. But why not, for instance, try to see behind the outwardly contradictory form of individual ideas the depth of content in which opposites converge or combine – according to the principle of *coincidentia oppositorum*?

In Andrzej Ostrowski’s essay, the problem of the relationship between the individual, the state, and the church is examined on the example of the views of another Russian philosopher, Leo Karsavin. More precisely, the only text analyzed in this essay is Karsavin’s brochure *The Orthodox Church, the Person and the State*,⁷ but the main question of interest to Ostrowski is Karsavin’s attitude to war. The author believes that “one can speak of a particular originality of Karsavin’s deliberations on this subject”, i.e., the theme of war. At the same time, the author aims “to draw attention to the implications that arise from Karsavin’s reflections”, including those concerning war. In other words, the reader may initially be confused as to whether the thesis about the inevitability of war, which is actually discussed by the author of the essay, is Karsavin’s own “original” thesis or whether it is only the author’s reflections.

As a result, we have to admit that the author’s interpretation prevails in this case. Karsavin’s words that the state “is also forced to fight when it seeks to realize legal and legitimate goals”⁸ are interpreted as an opportunity that “any war can be justified”, since “it is enough to invoke the established law of a given state and its goals, which – with a view to the so-called *raison d’état* – will always be right”. Waging war turns out to be not just an obligation, but a sacred duty of the state. Paying “attention to what Karsavin did not say”, the author

⁷ For some reason the author calls it *a dissertation*. It is a pity that the range of sources for this study was too narrow.

⁸ In the original: “gosudarstvo ‘vynuzhdeno voevat’ dazhe togda, kogda stremitsya k osushchestvleniyu samyh zakonnyh i pravil’nyh celej”.

considers the question: on whom, according to Karsavin, lies the responsibility for the war. Unfortunately, Ostrowski misses the Russian philosopher's words that one can speak of the empirical inevitability of war, but no one can justify war in a moral way. War has no moral justification even when one fights for a cause he believes to be right: first, a sinful man and a sinful state cannot possibly know that they are right, and second, even if the cause is right, sinful means are not made sinless by it.⁹ This argumentation of Karsavin can hardly be interpreted as an opportunity to "justify any war".

What about the Orthodox Church? The author sees contradictions in Karsavin's statements about the Orthodox Church's attitude to war. According to Ostrowski, the Russian thinker overcomes these contradictions too easily and states that "the Truth of the Orthodox Church of Christ is absolute; therefore, it blesses only those fighting on behalf of the state whose laws, goals and rationale are in line with this Truth". Such a statement would perhaps be quite compatible with the moral justification of war in the name of some state idea. However, Karsavin did not make such statement. According to Karsavin, the Church blesses soldiers because they strive for the good when they want to defend their brothers and the good of their fatherland, and they do a great good when they sacrifice their lives. But the empirical fact of killing their enemies does not cease to be a sin, and the Church does not call this sin good. Avoiding any direct condemnation of the war, the Church prays for God's Justice to be done, but not for the empirical overcoming of the enemy. This Justice is not related to the military victory, but to the overcoming of the only enemy of Christians, evil, so God's Justice can be achieved even in the defeat of the state that started the war.¹⁰

This reasoning of the Russian philosopher, however, does not really convince the author - he writes that "regarding this case, Karsavin did not take into account the national orthodox churches that pray for the victory of their countries". Karsavin indeed "took no account" of such prayers, which, in his words, "have no meaning at all", i.e., are no longer prayers of the Church, but merely the words spoken at the dictation of the state. Here, in fact, it

⁹ See Lev P. Karsavin, "Cerkov', lichnost' i gosudarstvo", in: Lev P. Karsavin, *Malye sochineniya* (Saint Petersburg: Aletejya, 1994), 426.

¹⁰ See *ibidem*, 426.

is no longer said about the dialectic of the “inner” and “outer” Church (the author of the essay reflects this distinction in writing with capital or lower case letters - Orthodox Church and orthodox church), but about the complete subordination of the church organization to the state, about the moral discrediting of a particular church hierarchy. Apparently, Karsavin could not ignore this possibility,¹¹ so he wrote out point by point the conditions of the Church’s *independence* from the state, on the fulfillment of which depends the approximation to the ideal of *symphony* in their mutual relations.

The conversation concerning Russian philosophy is going on. It inevitably acquires new accents and touches on new topics. It becomes more critical, and sometimes even tough. It is important that it does not become superficial, but on the contrary, it allows approaching the necessary depth of understanding.

¹¹ The task of his text, however, was not to denounce specific instances of such discrediting, but to set forth the Orthodox teaching on the subject.