



**The Russian Obsession
with History and Historicism
(UBC 1971)**

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The Russian Obsession with History and Historicism

The second Dal Grauer¹ Memorial Lecture

Totem Park, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada,
2 March 1971²

Isaiah Berlin spoke on this subject on at least four occasions between 1962 and 1973, and his (extempore) words on all four occasions have been preserved. On 12 December 1962 the Russian Research Center at Harvard hosted a talk and discussion on ‘The Addiction of Russian Intellectuals to Historicism’, transcribed [here](#), probably from a stenographer’s notes. ‘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 present lecture, transcribed below, and again a [recording](#) is available.³ Finally, there was a BBC talk, recorded on 14 December 1973, transmitted on Radio 3 on 24 July 1973 (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 in the *Listener*.⁴

¹ A. E. ‘Dal’ Grauer (1906–61), President and Chairman, British Columbia Power Corporation and BC Electric Company, Chancellor and Chairman of the Board of Governors of the University of British Columbia. On his death his widow and friends endowed a memorial lectureship at UBC.

² Berlin had given a related lecture on the previous afternoon.

³ The recording is not in good condition, and there are some gaps and garblings which have required conjectural restoration. Material currently inaudible to the editor is shown as bracketed ellipses – [...]. If any reader/listener can suggest improvements, [the editor](#) will be grateful to be informed.

⁴ 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

THE RUSSIAN OBSESSION WITH HISTORY AND HISTORICISM

ALLEN SINEL⁵ [...] Berlin, who will give tonight's second Grauer Memorial Lecture. I should like to thank the Totem Residences for offering us this place to give the lecture, and stress how this lecture is indeed conceived for students in residence, and how happy we are to see all these students here. Sir Isaiah Berlin, formerly holder of one of the most distinguished chairs at Oxford, the Chichele Professorship of Political and Social Theory,⁶ and now President of Wolfson College at Oxford, is truly one of the great intellectuals of our time. He has made outstanding contributions to philosophical thought, to the history of ideas, to the study of Russian literature and to Russian intellectual history, the field of tonight's lecture, entitled 'The Russian Obsession with History and Historicism'. Indeed, so wide-ranging are Sir Isaiah's interests that they defy classification by any narrow disciplinary approach. Philosopher, critic, historian, political thinker: he is all of these. But more than that, he has that rare gift of being able to share with those fortunate enough to hear, in the most inspiring yet witty way, his erudition and his wisdom. Those who attended his Monday afternoon lecture have already had vivid proof of this quality; to those who are hearing him tonight for the first time I need only say 'Listen.' Welcome, then, Sir Isaiah Berlin.

BERLIN Ladies and gentlemen, may I begin by thanking Professor Sinel for introducing me so generously. I can only say it probably does more credit to him than to me, and reveals more about his heart and his generosity than about my qualities, and for this I am most grateful to him. I return the compliment in double form.

I was going to speak tonight about Russian historicism and history.

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.'" 'History', in 'Out of the Year', *Listener*, 19 and 26 December 1974, 830.

⁵ Professor Allen Aaron Sinel (1934–2015), like Berlin a child of Russian Jewish émigrés, met Berlin in Oxford on a one-year fellowship. He joined UBC in 1964, and taught there for fifty years.

⁶ sc. Social and Political Theory.

THE RUSSIAN OBSESSION WITH HISTORY AND HISTORICISM

So far as straight history is concerned, I dare say as many Russians have been interested in history as anybody else, anywhere else, and in a perfectly normal fashion too. But the subject which I propose to talk about is a particular influence upon certain sections of them of particular interpretations of history which seem to me to have made a very great deal of difference to their national existence during the last one hundred and fifty years, and through that to all of us.

There are a great many motives for the study of history. Let me mention eight or nine at least. To begin with, people study history because of the solidarity which it conveys. We are all the sons of Cadmus; we are all Trojans. The first Frenchman was Francio, who came from Troy, the French were taught before the sixteenth century. The English were taught that they were all children of a Trojan called Brute. Anything which promotes national solidarity tends to excite us in history. It increases national cohesion: that's what the sociologists teach us. We are all the sons of Troy, we are all the sons of Abraham, we are all the sons of the same dragon – that is one motive. The second one is patriotism, glory, past achievements to inspire us to great future ones. The third is simply as material for the sciences, material for sociology, material for social psychology, simply natural philosophy teaching with material from deeds in history, in the way in which, say, Thucydides did it, or perhaps Hume and the sociologists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Or perhaps it's simply a school of morals: you pick out the bad and the good moments in history, like Voltaire, like Macaulay – you point out the moments which are progressive and splendid, and you point out moments which are squalid and bloodstained in order to teach people to avoid them. This is what is called 'philosophy teaching by examples'.⁷ Then there is the use

⁷[Henry St John, Viscount] Bolingbroke, *Letters on the Study and Use of History*, letter 2: *The Works of Lord Bolingbroke* (London, 1844) ii 177. Bolingbroke says that he thinks he read the remark in Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and he is right (see *Ars rhetorica* 11. 2), except that the *Ars rhetorica* is no longer attributed to Dionysius. Pseudo-Dionysius attributes his version – 'History is philosophy

of history simply for straight political purposes, in which you simply teach history as the struggle between rationalism and irrationalism, or clericalism and anticlericalism, or left and right. This a school of history very well known in our day. Or perhaps it's a school which represents history as a great divine drama beginning with the creation of man and ending with the transfiguration and with the second coming, with all the great historical personages and periods who live out this great god-inspired and god-written dramatic succession of episodes in the way in which it is written about in the Bible, and in the way in which Augustine treated it, or various medieval philosophers, or Bossuet, or, in a secular form, thinkers like Schelling and Hegel and Marx. Or it's a school of self-understanding, in which you understand human beings better and more profoundly through understanding what we came out of and why we are here and where we are going, in the way in which, say, Vico or Herder taught men, or to some extent Marx also: the self-transformation of man in the course of shaping his own history. Or it's a sort of ballet or folk-dance conception, as in Herder, in which each human group has its own part to play, and dances on to the stage in response to certain historical cues, so that every dog has its day, every nation, every human group appears in due course and proceeds to realise itself in some fashion which contributes to the civilisation of the whole. This is the conception of the garden with many flowers, each of which flowers, however [...], in a certain tempo at a certain point. Finally there is the motive of simple curiosity, just to find out what happened and why.

If you ask what it is that fixed itself upon the imagination of the Russians, it is the penultimate of these motives, namely the notion of each human group having its own part to play, appearing in time at a certain point and realising itself in its own unique peculiar fashion. And if you ask why this is so, it is because the Russians, as I tried to point out in my lecture yesterday, were a latecomer to the

from examples' – to Thucydides, but it is in fact a creative paraphrase of what Thucydides says at 1. 22. 3.

great Western feast. They develop late as a world power, only in the early nineteenth century. They felt that they are looked upon, as I say, as powerful but barbarous, like all nations that were economically or socially backward. They had a feeling that they must demonstrate their powers, they must have some part to play, they must show that they do have a role to execute in the great unrolling of the human carpet, and any philosophy which taught that every powerful human group surely has a moment at which *it* occupies the stage, at which *it* teaches the rest of humanity, at which *its* message becomes a compelling message for all mankind – any such doctrine is likely to commend itself to a vigorous, ambitious group of human beings who had hitherto not played any significant role, and were both conscious of youth and strength and ambition, and at the same time felt themselves to be uneducated, ignorant, barbarous, and feared and despised by the more developed nations of the West. This happened to the Germans in the eighteenth century, and to the Russians, in due course, in the nineteenth, and to a good many people in the twentieth century, all around the globe, who are not very difficult to think of.

The fundamental motive, therefore, which dominated these Russians, particularly in the 1820s and 1830s, was a search for a libretto. Herzen put it very vividly when he asked the question: Has history a libretto? And if history has a libretto, like an opera, what part in it has been assigned to us? I won't go over again what I said to you yesterday about Chaadaev, who condemned his own people for having no past, and wondered if they really did have some role to play in history, and wondered why they'd been created. After Chaadaev had been condemned for lunacy, in daring to say that the Russians had no significant history, and perhaps have no very significant part to play, he duly repented, as others have done since his day, and in his later work he no longer insisted upon the gloomy and meaningless past of Russia, but, on the contrary, in a famous essay called 'Apology of a Madman' – 'Apologie d'un fou' – he says: It may be that coming late to the feast of the nations carries its own advantages. After all, Europe is probably at the end of its

tether. ‘We are beginning; they are finishing’⁸ is the well-known cry of developing nations. Maybe a special role has been reserved for us. Maybe there is a special advantage in being backward, because they will have invented all the weapons of modern civilisation, they have gone through terrible industrial hell for the purpose of creating the advanced weapons of civilisation, the machinery, the technology which is being developed now. We are able to profit by this without going through the agonies through which they have gone. We can profit by their labours without paying the price.

This notion that lateness carries its own reward, that if you come late you can profit by the gifts or by the inventions of others without necessarily having to earn them by the kind of labour which the others have had to expend, is something which Chaadaev is the first to enunciate. It is then repeated by Herzen; it is repeated by Chernyshevsky, who was an early Russian socialist thinker, in the 1860s and the 1870s. It was finally repeated by the late Isaac Deutscher, when he explains why it is that nations in Asia and Africa perhaps have a better chance of succeeding than the exhausted nations of the West. This is a well-known object of hope. It’s a well-known prop for people who feel that their resources have been somewhat inadequate in the past, and therefore that there may be something to be said for starting with an absolutely blank sheet. This is a doctrine which is frequently repeated in Russia in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The other motive is that with the decay of the authority of the Church, and with the general decay of religion in the early nineteenth century, they needed some substitute, some faith, some goal to which to fix themselves. And it appeared to them that the historical doctrines which they derived from the Germans, principally from Herder and from Hegel, in which history *is* a drama with many acts and scenes, in which therefore there is an order in terms of which various nations can appear on the stage through trapdoors in order to play their part – if this could be believed, it offered them the firmest hope of doing something

⁸ See 26 below.

significant, of acquiring the kind of proud national self-identity which they were in need of, for which they felt a necessity.

This kind of ersatz religion can be felt particularly strongly in the writings of Russian critics in the 1830s and 1840s. As I tried to say yesterday, if you take the critic Belinsky, he really tried to live the doctrines of Hegel. Once he decided that Hegel was right, and that everything which happened in history had its explanation, and therefore that everything which happened in history could be justified by being a historical necessity, coming when it does, he really tried to live this doctrine, even though it committed him to various disagreeable consequences. Nobody has ever tried to live doctrines with the intensity and with the earnestness and with the depth of the Russians. There have been lots of philosophies of history since Hegel. After all, there are the philosophies of Spengler and of Toynbee. You may believe in Toynbee's doctrines or you may not. But nobody has ever tried to live Toynbee. The Russians are the only people who really have tried to live through what they genuinely believed in, in this sense. The Russian intellectuals of the 1830s and 1840s attempted in their very lives to behave like people upon whom it was incumbent to realise certain values which only the 1830s and 1840s could bring to fruition. They asked themselves what history was like. They decided that the Germans were right, that if there was to be a science of history – and they believed in science: science was the only great liberating force of the modern world, which would for ever kill superstition, which would for ever kill ignorance and prejudice and all the horrors of the past – if there *is* a science, there must be a pattern, there must be a pattern which can be understood. If there is a pattern, the question to ask is: Where do we occur in this pattern? Where are we? Where do we come in? Which stage have we reached? And this is what preoccupies a good many Russian thinkers in the middle 1850s.

The entire argument between the Slavophiles and the Westerners, which is a well-known argument erupting in Russia in the nineteenth century, takes a deeply historical form. On the one hand there are the Slavophiles, who say: We have our own unique past, we needn't follow the West. Someone like the thinker

Khomyakov says: Look at what has occurred in the West. There are two tendencies there. On the one hand, the Roman Church that has become decayed, which has simply produced a feeble bureaucracy and an enfeebled authoritarian order without any spirit, without any soul, which at present oppresses the decadent peoples of France and Italy; on the other hand, the revolt against it in the direction of Protestantism, which is simply an atomising force which has split people up into mere individuals and has robbed them of all creative urge, which has destroyed their sense of community, and which has made of each man a watertight little island unable to communicate with others, totally self-centered and self-concentrated. We, fortunately, through the Schism, because we have not participated in these heresies of the West, have preserved the freshness, the creativity, the nearness to Christ, the nearness to God, a spiritual liberty and a natural sense of community which we alone of all the human tribes have possessed, and this we must carefully cultivate. On no account must we imitate these decayed and unworthy representatives of the Christian religion. Hence tremendous stress on our Russian past and tremendous condemnation of Peter the Great, who had the temerity to make the ghastly blunder of trying to imitate the West and so kill the natural spontaneity of the Slav spirit, the one thing which we can be proud of, the unruined, unspoiled, unbent, free Russian spirit which beats in the breasts of our uncorrupted peasants. It may no longer beat in the breasts of our semi-corrupted bourgeoisie. It is dead in the breasts of our wholly corrupted bureaucracy. But if you go to the villages, you will still find there the great, the broad Russian nature, the uncorrupted, smiling Russian faces which are symptoms of a far freer and far nobler development than the busy, neurotic, oppressed caricature figures running about the streets of Paris and of London now show. This is the Slavophiles. I have slightly caricatured their doctrine, but the essence of it is, I think, more or less as I have stated it.

In answer to this there are the Westerners – Granovsky, Belinsky, Chernyshevsky – various persons who say: Not at all. If

science is science and the same pattern must be followed by all men qua men, what the West has done we shall have to do too. The very notion of a separate state being reserved for us, of something special being reserved for us, the idea that we alone have been excepted by God from the terrible fate of other nations – the others have gone to their doom through following false paths, but we alone have been preserved to be the saviours of mankind, which Dostoevsky afterwards said – this is surely unscientific, whatever else it may be. If men are what they are, if there is a human nature which can be examined scientifically, if there are laws which can be discovered about how human societies evolve in relation to their environment, in relation to the surrounding nature, and in relation to the organs with which they are endowed – if there is such a thing, then it is perfectly clear that there cannot be any exceptions. If a thing is a cow, it is going to have a cow-like fate. If the creature is human, it must have a human fate. If one is a nation, one must have the fate of nations. All nations must go through the same hoop – with minor variations, perhaps, but in general through the same kind of process. Therefore, we are simply backward. Peter the Great was perfectly right. What he did was to drive us in a rather brutal manner, and a rather precipitate manner, but still drive us, on to the main road of human civilisation. And thank God we are there. We've paid a very heavy price for it. But if we hadn't done that, we should have been where the Eskimos are now. And therefore we must go forward. All this talk about the Russian commune, all this talk about Russian freedom, all this talk about the broad Russian soul has not saved other nations from doom. The Arabs too have had a communal existence. They've also had a *mir*, they've also had an *obshchina*, as it is called – some kind of communal existence, of which the Slavs are also proud – and yet they've made nothing of it. There is absolutely no point in inviting us to go through the fate of the Arabs of the Arabian Desert.

And so there is a well-known argument about whether Peter the Great was a noble saviour or an obsessed lunatic – and criminal, indeed. And this continues through the 1830s, the 1840s and the

1850s. The ground of it is entirely historical. Both parties appeal not so much to history as to patterns in history, to a pattern of how human beings develop. Each grounds his claim entirely on historical argument, and each advocates the adoption of this or that course on the ground that this is now historically desirable, the Slavophiles because we are fulfilling our Slav nature, and this is the way to do it, the Westerners because this is the path to justice, civilisation, light, and to everything which the English and the French have already done, and we still have to do.

This obsession with ‘Where are we on the ladder of civilisation? Have we reached stage seventeen, or are we still at stage nine? Which step are we on, in order to calculate what step is appropriate?’ – this is not thinkable in the West: the notion that everything must be adjusted to a position in the abstract schema in which you believe as much as people believed in the word of God at an earlier stage. In fact, history now replaces the divine word; history replaces faith in religion; history becomes that great external authority in terms of which you justify or condemn acts. Persons in the West didn’t go about saying: What is to be the fate of England? What is to be the fate of France? *Sud’ba rossii*,⁹ the destinies of Russia, becomes an obsessive subject to the novelists and the historians, to the social thinkers, to everybody who is concerned with Russia. What is to be our fate? Where are we going? Are we going to be destroyed by the Western nations? Are we for ever going to lag behind them, or on the contrary are we going to overtake them? Are we going to be as good as them? Or even better? Have we a special duty towards them? Have they a duty towards us? Are we the messianic nation that is going to save them, or on the contrary are we the home of darkness and barbarism, never to be saved from the dreadful yoke of this ghastly government? And so on.

When Western thinkers ask themselves questions, they do not ask themselves questions in this form. When Michelet, let us say, a French historian just as much obsessed by the thought of history

⁹ ‘The fate of Russia’.

– when he denounces the Jesuits, or when he denounces Napoleon III as a tyrant, or whatever he may do, he doesn't say to himself: Have the Jesuits betrayed French destiny? Is Napoleon III a traitor to the laws of history? This wouldn't mean anything. When John Stuart Mill wants to know whether this or that course of action is the proper course of action for the English nation in 1860, or whenever it may be, he doesn't ask himself: What is the historical obligation of a nation like the English in 1862? On which rung of the ladder of civilisation are we at the moment, and what does this rung demand of us? This notion that history makes demands upon you, that you must behave in accordance with what the historical moment exacts from you, that there is an inexorable pattern in which you are to find yourself, and having found yourself on the map, this itself conveys or entails a certain direction in our behaviour – this is typical of people who cannot as yet trust themselves, trust their own common sense as John Stuart Mill could, can't trust their political convictions as Michelet could, and have to have recourse to some outside authority: in the old days, the word of God, in the new days, the new end of history, which is a kind of vade mecum, which gives you the answers to all the deepest questions of national and individual existence.

You will find that this thing goes right on. Let me give you an example of the sort of thing I mean. The historian Chicherin, in the middle of the nineteenth century, argues that a Russian constitution cannot be obtained, a liberalisation of the tsarist regime isn't on, because we are still at such and such a stage of the Hegelian evolution. Since we are only at a rather early stage, we may have to wait centuries for all the trials, for all the thesis and antithesis and synthesis to be gone through and the synthesis to produce its own antithesis, and this to produce its own synthesis. All this has to be gone through patiently; the corridor must be gone through stage by stage; you can't skip stages; history is an absolutely inexorable pattern, and the idea of trying to skip stages is mere childishness. Herzen, writing to Bakunin in the late 1860s – Bakunin wants to make a revolution at once – says: You don't understand; revolutions cannot be made now; liberated slaves

cannot construct buildings which are capable of giving freedom; out of the bricks of slavery, out of the bricks of a prison, no free man's dwelling can be constructed.¹⁰ We have been through centuries of the knout, injustice, arbitrariness, monstrosity. Patience, patience: history has its his own tempo. Gradually we must educate our people towards these rewards, and in a certain rhythm of history to which you must adjust yourself. If you don't adjust yourself to this rhythm, if you do make a revolution, if you do have a putsch, you will find that history will avenge herself; that in fact, instead of creating a free community, you will merely create a new slave community to replace the old one. You will exchange one yoke for another. History cannot be mocked.

This semi-personification of history as an external force which governs you, and which you must study very carefully in order to be able to adjust yourself to its movements, is something, I won't say unique about the Russians, because the Germans show traces of it too, but which the Russians exhibit in a far more vivid degree than any other people. Take the great argument between the populists in the 1870s about what we ought to do. I shall give you an example of what I mean. The neo-Jacobin Tkachev thought that the only way to liberate the Russian people was by means of a putsch: We can't work with the peasants. We can't listen to what the peasants say. The peasants are the enormous mass of Russia, but they are stupid, reactionary and feckless. We can liberate them, but we can't expect them to liberate themselves. We can do something *for* them, but we can do nothing *with* them. If we trust the peasants, they will simply hand us over to the police, which in fact is what did happen to all those young men who in the early

¹⁰ This metaphor appears in *From the Other Shore*: 'The fatal error [of the French radicals in 1848] is [...] to have tried to free others before they were themselves liberated [...]. They 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.' A. I. Gertsen [Herzen], *Sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh* (Moscow, 1954–66), vi 51; Alexander Herzen, *From the Other Shore*, trans. Moura Budberg [and IB], and *The Russian People and Socialism*, trans. Richard Wollheim, with an introduction by IB (London, 1956), 57.

years of the 1870s did go into the country and did try to help the peasants, but they obviously displayed some genteel actions which were clearly so unlike the peasants, in spite of their clothes, that the peasants were naturally suspicious, and handed them over to the authorities in droves. And therefore the only way of promoting a proper revolution is by having a small, well-organised conspiracy of full-time professional revolutionaries who will seize power and hold it, if need be against the peasants, in order to liberate these very peasants, if need be against their will.

To this the more moderate populist Lavrov said: But if you do that, you'll be behaving like the Jacobins in France. The appeal is always to history. Look at what happened there. They seized power, then in order to protect themselves against counter-revolutionaries, they more or less had to militarise themselves. The very act of having to hold on to power in order to prevent people overthrowing you brutalises and militarises you, and makes you ultimately suppress the people whom you are trying to liberate, in the very act of trying to resist the counter-revolution. Anything which makes you into a besieged army tends to brutalise you, tends to make you into an oppressor. And once you have become an oppressor, the question of survival becomes important, the question of the self-perpetuation of your power, and you will never liberate them at all.

To which Tkachev said: Yes, it's all very well your saying that, but let's look at other examples in history. If you wait, that will happen to you which happened in the last two centuries in France, and in England, and in Germany. Where do we get our revolutionaries from? We get them from the educated classes. We get them from among the doctors. We get them from among the engineers. We get them from among the agrarian experts. We get them from among the lawyers, whose lives are of course made miserable by the [...] idiotic regime of tsarist Russia. But if they are intelligent, they will do something. They will provide the scientists with laboratories. They will give doctors employment. They will employ the engineers in state enterprises. They will use agricultural experts to improve the peasants, and they will buy them off. All

they need is simply the opportunity for work, for creative work. Once they do that they will cease to be revolutionary, the power will go out of them. And then you won't be able to make the revolution at all.

He needn't have worried. The Russian government, in fact, did not display such intelligence. But the analogies were with what happened in France towards the end of the eighteenth century and at the beginning of the nineteenth. By giving opportunities to these very men, they managed to disarm potential revolutionaries. Therefore the appeal in both cases is entirely to historical examples. There isn't very much appeal to direct moral principles, or direct political principles, as there would have been in the case of similar disputes in France, or in England, or in America, or even in Germany. Similarly, all the [...] argument in the 1860s and 1870s takes this form: Where are we? What point of the path have we reached? Which rung of the ladder? Which step of the advance have we made?

That is why I wish to convey to you that when Marxism finally came to Russia in a serious way, which happened towards the end of the 1870s, the beginning of the 1880s, its seed fell on immensely fertile soil. Already the soil was prepared for historicism, in this sense, already the Russians were prepared to believe that what the great authorities of the West said was true. Another characteristic of these Russians is immense bowing before foreign authorities. Having none of your own, you always quote texts. If you want to prove a point, you don't prove it so much from empirical observation. Sometimes, of course, you use historical examples, but there was not very much independent sociological thought. What happens is you say: Buckle says; Mill says; Spencer says; Darwin says. And these things have enormous authority, not because these men are so important, but because they are in the confidence of history. They are scientists. History is a science. These men have the secret. They have the key of the pattern. And if they say that, surely, surely. This is what Western scientists believe, and who are we poor fools to resist the onward march of this great science, which covers history as well? So when Marxism

came, it fell on very fertile soil, and the seeds sprouted. The socialist revolutionaries who were not Marxists were generally terrified by what Marxism taught, because what Marxism taught them was some form of determinism, that there is a pattern in history which cannot be avoided. I do not wish to be a toe on the leg of history, said Mikhailovsky.¹¹ I do not wish to believe myself to be dominated by some huge force over which I have no control.

Freedom of the will, determinism, is a famous human problem which people have worried about from the days of the Stoics, at least, until the present day. And people have accepted that it is no doubt an agonising problem both for philosophers and sometimes for ordinary men. But the Russians are the only people for whom the problem of free will actually made a difference to political propaganda. When Mikhailovsky uttered these things, and other socialist revolutionaries objected that if there was a grim determinism prevailing in the world, then perhaps there was no point in running [...] – if history is in fact, according to Marx, going to do the job for us. First you have the feudal regime; then you have early industrialism; then you have developed industrialism; then you have the industrialists training an army of workers against their own purposes, but they train them to become their own gravediggers. Then you have the revolution made by the workers, which inevitably ends in the victory of the proletariat and the emergence of the classless society. If this is inevitable, why should we today take risks, risk imprisonment and death, when by simply waiting – it might take a little longer, but there's absolutely no point in taking unnecessary risks, if history, if the stars in their courses are going to do the job for us.

¹¹ Possibly a reference to N. K. Mikhailovsky's '**O Vsevolode Garshine**', *Severnyi vestnik* 1885 no. 12 – repr. in, e.g., his *Literaturno-kriticheskie stat'i* (Moscow, 1957), 312–17 – where much is made of Garshin's metaphor, in his story 'Trus' ('The Coward'), of a soldier as a 'toe' ('palets ot nogi'), an 'insignificant part' of a 'huge organism'. But Mikhailovsky does not here use IB's formulation, which may well be a characteristically Berlinian streamlined recasting of what was actually said.

In order to stop the Party from falling into this rather gloomy condition, the thinker Peter Struve, writing in the 1890s, has actually to persuade his party that although ninety per cent of history is determined, ten per cent is not. You don't get Kautsky or Bernstein in Germany, you don't get Jaurès in France, you don't get William Morris or somebody in England, all of whom are socialists touched by Marxism, having to persuade their followers that although as to ninety per cent they can't help themselves, because they are the playthings and pawns of some great impersonal process, yet there is a corner of ten per cent where perhaps a certain amount of freedom will prevail, and therefore the game isn't completely up. It's all right: there is some room for individual enterprise and initiative. But in Russia Struve, who is a perfectly serious thinker, has to work out a doctrine in accordance with which, although ninety per cent is foreclosed – you can't do anything about that – ten per cent is free, so it's worth doing certain things after all. It's worth organising, it's worth taking risks, it's worth having strikes, it's worth pressing the government, it's worth having conspiracies, and the rest of it.

This is a very unique situation. Let me give you another example. The socialist revolutionaries emerging from the study of the agrarian question realise, of course, at a certain point that if Marx was right, and if the condition for a successful revolution was having an enormous industrial proletariat which was in fact the majority of the nation, then the Russians, the majority of whose population, ninety-two per cent of whose population were simply agricultural workers or peasants, hadn't any chance of having a revolution in their lifetime. They'd have to wait for a very long time. And the Marxist Plekhanov, the teacher of Lenin, did indeed say: It's no good. We've got to get through it, got to go through the corridor. We must now help the capitalists to create the capitalist regime. They will breed the proletariat, and the proletariat will overthrow them. We are still at a rather early stages of this process. You can't jump these stages. We've now got to help the capitalists to create the very order which is going to oppress us into liberation.

This was a very disagreeable topic for people who thought that no condition was worse than having an oppressed proletariat – the ghastly conditions of the industrial revolution with all its horrors. Nevertheless, if history is a science, all these stages must occur, and so on. So the socialist revolutionaries wrote – one of them, at least, or two of them, in fact – wrote a letter to Karl Marx¹² and said: Do we have to go through this stage? Is there not some method of attaining socialism through the peasant commune by circumnavigating? Must we really go through the horrors of industrialisation, of the creation of a proletariat, of exploitation, of surplus value, of the entire bag of tricks? Well, at first Marx naturally wasn't very pleased by this. He was astonished, and said: Are you asking me to exempt you from the laws of history, like a headmaster? Could they have a special arrangement made with history? This was really too naive. On the other hand, although he despised and disliked Slavs for the greater part of his life, in the 1870s, when there was a period of extreme reaction in Europe – it happened after the crushing of socialism, when the chances of any left-wing movement in Europe were very dim – the only people who appeared to him to display any initiative were the Russians. There at least some governors were shot. There were some bombs which did go off. The revolutionaries did show a certain amount of individual courage and stamina.

Three or four of them managed to get out, and they all came to pay homage to Marx, and to recognise him as the greatest revolutionary theorist in the world. It would need an even stronger nature than Marx's not to yield to the profound and sincere

¹² This is a reference to an exchange between Vera Zasulich and Marx in early 1881. (IB's reference to 'two of them' may reflect the fact that Nikolay Morozov had visited Marx in December 1880 on behalf of the Executive Committee of Narodnaya volya and asked him to write a text on the Russian village commune. IB may have mistaken a visit for a letter.) **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.

veneration which these brave and heroic men evidently felt for the old man in London. And so he did relent somewhat. And he wrote them a letter in which he said: Well, when I was writing *Das Kapital*, when I was evolving my theory of historical materialism, I wasn't thinking about Eastern Europe at all. I was really thinking about the West (which was true enough). In your conditions – well (he said), in certain conditions you might be able to do it: if, for example, there is a world revolution to sustain you on its shoulders, because if there isn't a world revolution the other capitalist countries will extinguish your revolution, however successful you may be in starting it. If there *is* a world revolution, it's just possible that you may be able to go straight into socialism without entering the long and painful stage of factory industrialisation. This is very uncertain, but there is a chance.

Now, you must understand the position of the Marxist party. The Marxists really believe in the literal inspiration of Marx's texts. They believe terribly in the authority of the great scientists of the West, as great, naive people are liable to do. When Plekhanov, who was a straight Marxist, self-converted in about 1883 or so – perhaps a little later – discovered that this letter had been written, he realised that the publication of it would cause absolute havoc in the Russian Marxist party. If Marx gave them the faintest hope of being able to circumvent the necessity of industrialisation and of breeding a proletariat, not only would the socialist revolutionaries have turned out to be right as against the case for the Marxists, but the Marxists themselves might become demoralised. And so he suppressed the letter, the letter published for the first time in 1924, well after everybody is dead, well after the Revolution. And I think this was right from his point of view.

The point I wish to make is this. It wouldn't have been necessary to suppress the letter by Marx in any other country. If Marx had written a letter of a somewhat heretical, non-Marxist type to Kautsky in Germany, or to Bernstein – if he had written in these terms to Jules Guesde, who was the leader of the Marxist socialists in France – it might have stimulated a certain amount of lively discussion in the socialist organs. People would have said he means

this or he means that. We ought to interpret his text in this way or in that way. We must learn from history. Marxism is not dogma. It has to be applied in a creative and spontaneous fashion to the changing circumstances of the time. Some people would have said: Well, perhaps the old man was nodding when he wrote this. Perhaps he wrote it rather late in life. Perhaps his earlier writings are more important. At any rate I don't think there would have been anything more than simple lively debate. But in Russia it would have created a disaster in the Party. Plekhanov was absolutely right from his point of view in suppressing this document, which afterwards caused fearful indignation among the people who still remembered him when they discovered what he had done. But from the point of view of preserving the cohesion and the faith of the Russian movement, these kinds of heresies had to be kept dark, even when they proceeded from the author of the orthodoxy himself. Consequently, as I say, the letter was suppressed.

I'm giving you this only as an illustration of the passionate faith of the total idealists in the notion of the inevitable historical pattern upon which the whole of late Russian Marxism was securely founded. And Marxism was an attractive doctrine because at the time when the police had finally caught up with individual revolutionary terrorism – which had in fact succeeded in assassinating the Emperor Alexander II – when they finally disbanded the terrorist movement, Marxism was a relief, because it at once said that individual terrorism was no use, and when people said 'What then should we do?', the answer was you would go to the British Museum or its equivalent, study history, and after you had discovered the proper theory of history, then gradually build up a party and the propaganda and go through all the historical stages patiently, one by one. This was a very great relief to people who didn't want either to risk their lives or go to jail, above all because it offered a happy ending to the story. Success in the end was guaranteed. There is nothing that inspires people so much as the conviction that the stars in their courses are fighting

for them. And this Marxism genuinely guaranteed more than any other movement of its time.

If you ask about Lenin, for example – I don't wish to multiply examples – he was absolutely steeped in historical mythology. In 1896 or thereabouts – I don't guarantee the date – being impatient by nature, and being rather gloomy at the thought that a long period of industrialisation was needed before the revolution could possibly be a success in a peasant country, which is what the Western Marxists were maintaining; being, as I say, somewhat discouraged by this, he tried to work up a theory whereby, after all, peasants were peasant proprietors; proprietors were capitalists; if what you needed was a capitalist regime in a high period of development, maybe Russian agriculture, in a rather extended fashion, could be regarded as a high capitalist regime in an advanced stage of development. Therefore, perhaps the chances of an early revolution are not all that dim. Well, he was ultimately persuaded out of it, naturally enough, but the mere attempt to adapt the Marxist doctrine to rather recalcitrant Russian conditions showed this absolute desire to try to fit into the proper slot in history. Otherwise there was no hope.

Similarly, in the revolution of 1905 the question arose: Where are we on the historical scale? Are we in 1848 or are we later? What sort of revolution should we make? Should we read Marx's writings of 1850, which tell us that the proper way for a proletarian party to proceed is to make a revolution together with the liberals, and then gradually sabotage the liberals, and take over power, which is Marx's advice in about 1850? Or, on the contrary, do we read the Marx of the 1860s, who says that the only thing to do is to start a slow educational process – propaganda, the creation of a cadre of conscious workers who will gradually lead the proletariat, which by this time will have become the physical majority of the country? Depending on the answer about which Marx to read, the appropriate political tactics will follow. They would follow and be valid only if they can be attached to and read off from the book, which itself is a key to the actual structure of history and the development and pattern of modern society.

In other words, the fixation upon historicism in this sense is very, very great. And history becomes, as I say, what God was to Calvinists versus Catholics or Catholics versus Calvinists; what the will of God was to Muslims versus Christians or Christians versus Muslims. Even in 1947, Stalin was still able to kill quite a lot of people for the crime of ignoring the true historical laws of economic development. I don't want to say that every Russian was affected by this; I wish to say only that the clan, the group of persons who in fact affected Russian history, namely the intellectuals, who gave its tone to the intelligentsia, gave its tone to radical rational thought, and ultimately produced the only party which, in 1917, appeared organised enough and vigorous enough to seize power and to use it to effective account – that these people were intoxicated with the notion of a historical pattern. And this is what gave them their strength, their hope, and militated in favour of their success: there is nothing that succeeds so well as a coherent doctrine, whether or not the facts fit. If the facts don't fit, you can blend them to the doctrine: that also is a way of succeeding.

I don't know if all Russians were affected by this. It has to be admitted, for example, that the socialist revolutionaries never were. A revolutionary like Bakunin, too, who thought that any time and any place was suitable for making a revolution, was not much affected by historical theories. The idea of historical determinism struck him as a hideous cage which would prevent people like him from acting in the wild, free, spontaneous and destructive manner which is what he loved above all. There were other thinkers, too; there were some among the populists in the 1870s, like Mikhailovsky and Pisarev, who didn't accept it. Tolstoy didn't accept this theory, among the great writers, but then he didn't accept it because he didn't believe in history at all; because he thought that anyone who pretended to find out about the patterns of history was simply a charlatan, because there *were* no laws knowable to man, and anybody who pretended to know any, like sociologists or scientists, were simply telling lies. I have read the whole of *Das Kapital*, said Tolstoy. I have read it so accurately that I could be examined on it. Let me tell you, there's nothing in it.

The other group of persons who were not affected by the prevailing historicism, let me tell you, and this is interesting enough, were none other than the historians. I don't say they were all unaffected, and you could say that perhaps Granovsky and Solovev the elder – the father of the philosopher – did make a formal bow to historicism. In their introductions they do affect to say that history has a certain structure. Solovev produces such a Hegelian statement. And Granovsky says that history has a pattern, but we mustn't assume it to be rigid, because nothing is more awful than a man who comfortably lies down on a bed of dogma, and then proceeds not to think at all about how things really happened, and in fact there is a great deal more spontaneity in history than is allowed for by even the most eminent theorists; but, having said these things, he proceeds to write history in a perfectly normal manner. So does the greatest of all Russian historians, Klyuchevsky. So does Platonov. So does Kareev. So do all the most eminent historians at the turn of the century, and the Russians have had their share of profound eminent historians no less than any other nation. People who actually do history find that the way to write it is by sheer empirical research, by discovering what happened, when it happened, and trying to answer why it happened in terms of ordinary non-theoretical categories. So that the myth appealed, not to historians, but to people in search of an ersatz religion, or people who wanted a role, people who wanted there to be a guaranteed happy ending, people who wanted something which would equip them for life.

In modern days, this doctrine spread beyond the confines of Russia. The whole conception, for example, of the imperatives of industrialisation, of moments of take-off, of special historical launching-pads from which you can set off, of having to find out the exact moment at which you set off: that there are certain stages, and one must go through these stages, which you must not skip. The whole notion of following through a set pattern which is created for you by nature, by history herself, has become quite an embedded view in the thinking of quite a lot of backward nations seeking to acquire power and identity through industrialising

themselves on what they conceive to be the pattern of the Russian Revolution, and in this way has had an enormous influence in Asia and in Africa.

You'll find odd examples of it outside Asia and Africa too. For example, if you think of Nazi Germany in the later stages of the war which they lost. In 1945, when the Germans were losing the war very obviously, and when Mr Roosevelt died, and there was some hope in Germany that this would turn the war in their favour, because America might give up on the war, or something dramatic might happen to save them, and this didn't happen, Dr Goebbels said: It is inconceivable that the whole of history should lead to this. Surely after the rise of the Nazi party, all these miracles which happened in Germany cannot be wholly meaningless? And he said: History must indeed be a whore if she allows us to perish. Now this implies that there is some kind of godless history, that there is a historical pattern which you can understand, and if only you rely upon that you will be favoured, and that history will simply turn out to be a whore, history will turn out to be meaningless, is an inconceivable thought. Mussolini, when the Allies first landed in Sicily, and Italy was in danger, said: We are fighting, but history has us by the throat.¹³ Men one can resist, history scarcely.

And so you get this notion of a huge, impersonal force called 'history', which has its own pattern. If only you can find out where you belong there, and hitch yourself on to the correct bit of it, then you may be sure that you'll be carried on to the next stage by forces which nothing can resist. If you make a mistake and get yourself to the wrong place you will be crushed by the juggernaut. But that notion of history stems from this very pathetic although intelligible desire of the Russians, particularly in the nineteenth century, to acquire some doctrine in terms of which they would come out top, in terms of which all their apparent disadvantages would turn into advantages, in terms of which their backwardness and their

¹³ The Allies invaded Sicily in July–August 1943, but Mussolini's '**La storia vi prende alla gola**' ('History takes you by the throat') occurs in a speech of 23 February 1941.

THE RUSSIAN OBSESSION WITH HISTORY AND HISTORICISM

barbarism would be transmuted by some magical process into something which would make them victors over the very people who they thought, at any rate, despised them and mocked them and looked down upon them. This is really the doctrine.

I don't want at this stage to utter any general propositions about the validity or invalidity of historicism as a doctrine, or as a doctrine of the pattern of history. I have to come to a conclusion. I ought perhaps to hint to you that it seems to me that the twentieth century has done very little to prop up the view that history moves in inexorable stages. I think it was the late Mr Justice Brandeis of America, I can't remember where, who once said that the irresistible is very often merely that which people don't sufficiently try to resist. And I think there is a certain truth in that.

This is all I have to say on this topic. There's just one thing I'd like to add. If anyone wants to ask me questions I shall be extremely happy to reply to them. But as there are a good many people in this room who have honoured me by their presence, maybe it would be a good thing if there was perhaps, with your permission, an interval now of, say, three or four minutes in which those who wish to go away can go away, and those who wish to ask me questions or discuss things with me could be left behind and perhaps come forward, and ask me anything they wish. Thank you very much.

DISCUSSION

SINEL [...] see my introduction was not generous, but truthful. I'd like to thank Sir Isaiah on behalf of all of you for another very, very brilliant talk. Thank you. Be the questions asked.

INAUDIBLE QUESTION [...].

BERLIN I'm sorry, you're asking me whether there is something peculiar about the Russians which makes [...].

QUESTIONER Which makes them [...].

BERLIN I see. Yes. No, I don't think so. There may be something peculiar, but I don't know that – it's always rather a feeble thing to say to – national character is the very last kind of reasoning which one ought to use in explaining anything, because it's on the whole circular. You are simply saying, 'Russians are the kind of people who do this kind of thing, and that's why they do them?'; which is not a very illuminating sort of answer. No. I tried to convey, perhaps not very successfully, I'm afraid, that this is a situation which is fairly frequent in the case of all – not all, but anyhow many – undeveloped nations, when they are faced with a combination of circumstances, namely a feeling of their own strength – they have come to maturity – being precipitated on to the world stage after some period of isolation, suddenly find themselves involved in world events; and at the same time an acute feeling of, not an inferiority complex, but actual inferiority in the matter of education, of civilisation, of technology. And when they are in that condition I think you have to whistle to keep your courage up and you feel that since the past isn't there to buoy you up sufficiently, the future will be, something must be, and any doctrine which promises that is going to be very well received. And I don't think that's confined to the Russians at all, I think you will find exactly the same thing is true of various nations in Africa and Asia, who

feel that whatever may have happened in the past they have glorious futures, that the white races are on the retreat, and there is little to be done; for many years they have lingered in darkness, but there are 800 millions of them, soon there will be a billion, or there are 400 millions of them, soon there will be half a billion, or something else of that kind, that they are unexhausted, that the old imperialists are plainly rather exhausted, and therefore we shall come on to the stage.

The Germans felt it quite [...] in 1770. The Russians began feeling it, I suppose, somewhere around 1820. And other nations, I think, have subsequently felt exactly the same. I'm sure that's the – if you go to certain parts of Africa and Asia, I've no doubt that they feel they have numbers and strength and the future is on their side. It's the old saying: the Russian traveller Fonvizin, who visited Paris in 1777–8, who said: 'Nous commençons et ils finissent' – 'We are beginning; they are finishing.'¹⁴ So that I don't think it is peculiar to the Russians, that's what I want to say. It's a kind of historicism on my part to say that nations in such a condition tend to develop those kinds of consequences. But of that I am not altogether ashamed.

INAUDIBLE QUESTION [...].

BERLIN [...] Nothing inspires people so much – it's illogical, but nothing inspires people so much as the thought that the stars in their courses are fighting for you. Although you could leave it to the stars, you don't. You feel that if you go in a certain direction and historic forces are washing you up, if they are buoying you up and moving in the same direction, you will surely win. This is what buoyed up the Calvinists, who were equally deterministic in the wars of the sixteenth century. But in this case, of course, the [...] a revolution can be part of a determinist pattern. If you read Karl

¹⁴ Letter of 5 February 1778 to Yakov Bulgakov: Denis Ivanovich Fon-Vizin, *Sochineniya, pis'ma i izbrannyye perevody*, ed. P. A. Efremov (St Petersburg, 1866), 273.

Marx – that’s presumably what we are thinking of – if you read the works of Marx you will find that the revolution cannot be averted. Whether it will be bloody or not will depend perhaps upon the circumstances in which in each country it will arise. But that there *will* be a revolution, i.e. liquidation of one class by another in some forcible way, that he regards as an absolute historical necessity. The fact that it is necessary doesn’t make it less desirable to fight for on the part of those who are going to profit by it. The only thing is, of course, that they may think that even if they do nothing at all, it will come anyway. Therefore why make the effort? Well, the doctrine says: If that’s true, it will happen. But if you accelerate it, you will shorten the birth pangs: at least you’ll have it in your own day. People were not very satisfied to think that the revolution may take another five hundred years to mature. If you think that your own efforts may actually make it happen tomorrow, that no doubt is a very strong form of leverage.

INAUDIBLE QUESTION [...].

BERLIN It did. Yes. [...] a perfectly good question. In the case of the Chinese, I think, we do know the answer, you see. When Mao began to modify Marxism by saying that it’s possible to make a revolution as a result of the organisation of peasants, instead of waiting for the proletariat to develop, this was severely denied, as you know, by the Communists in Moscow; and in fact, when they successfully made this kind of revolution, they rather reluctantly had to swallow its results, and for a time, anyhow, pretend that this was all right: it was perfectly coherent and perfectly compatible and harmonious with orthodox Marxist doctrine, but of course it wasn’t. There is very little in the works of Marx about peasants: everything about peasants has to be imported afterwards. Lenin did a certain amount of trying to work out Marxist doctrine in the villages, by which you define the poor peasants as being some kind of proletariat. But the idea that an agrarian country like China could make a revolution without the aid of the industrial workers at all – the industrial workers weren’t even going to be the leaders of this

revolution, as they at least were in 1917 in Russia – that would be regarded as out of all question. Therefore when it happened, it administered a shock to the theory. How many theorists there were in Moscow and how deep a shock it was and how sincerely and how deeply by this time they believed in Marxism is something I can't tell you. But if they did believe it sincerely, they would have suffered an extreme intellectual trauma.

INAUDIBLE QUESTION [...].

BERLIN That is the question I never know the answer to. I don't think much, but it's an unpopular answer. Let me tell you, the old Russian sense of mission is what I ask myself about. Who ever generated the old Russian sense of mission? Dostoevsky. He believed in it. He thought, in the famous Pushkin speech and in a great many other writings, that Russia was a Christ-bearing nation which existed for the purpose of converting others. Even old Slavophiles like Aksakov and Khomyakov didn't really believe in the Russian mission vis-à-vis the world. They thought that they were the chosen instrument of Christian revelation, and that they were the most Christian of nations, and that their medieval organisation was in fact both the most human and the most Christian form of existence known to man. They are said to have been [...] privately. But I don't think there's a very strong sense of missionary enterprise: there may be other names. Khomyakov did not convert the English. Aksakov was not interested in converting the French. Therefore when you say 'Russian sense of mission', people talk about the third Rome. Well, there was a monk called Philotheus, it can't be denied, who did say, 'One Rome perished, the second perished, and the third will perish no more',¹⁵ but the monk

¹⁵ **'Two Romes have fallen, a third stands, and there will not be a fourth. And your Christian tsardom will not be replaced by another.'** 'Poslanie stariya Filofeya velikomu knyazyu Vasiliyu [...]', *Biblioteka literatury Drevnei Rusi*, ed D. S. Likachev and others (St Petersburg, 1997–2016), ix, *Konets XIV–pervaya polovina XVI veka* (2000).

THE RUSSIAN OBSESSION WITH HISTORY AND HISTORICISM

Philotheus didn't leave a very deep imprint upon the history of the Russian Church. He lived when he lived, and there were occasionally certain antinomians who revived his words and said these sorts of things. I dare say among the sectarians there probably were some rather *exaltés* types who went preaching this kind of thing. But I think the notion of Russia as a messianic nation, with a messianic message for the world, is much exaggerated. And I think that, so far as Marxism was concerned, it was [...] Marxist mission which has taken over. And if you take someone like Lenin, he did not believe in a Russian mission ever. His idea was there would be a world revolution. Russia happened to be the weakest link in the Russian structure, as it turned out, and therefore it fell to the privilege of Russia to be the first country to start the great proletarian revolution, as it fell to the privilege of the French to be the first country to embody the principles of liberty, fraternity and equality. But Russia wasn't doing it for herself. She didn't have any particular historical role. And the assumption was that once she started this great fire, it would take over the world. When it didn't, it was an extreme disappointment of the doctrine. Therefore the idea of this typical, unique Russian mission seems to me to be a piece of hindsight, a piece of reading backwards from the impression made by Marxism, by people like Berdyaev and others, into Dostoevsky, into the monk Philotheus, into various religious writings of this notion of the Russian mission. If you had asked an ordinary Russian intellectual round about 1850 whether he thought Russia had a special mission, I very strongly doubt if any of them would have had any idea what you meant.

INAUDIBLE QUESTION [...].

BERLIN [...] very much about – because I know very little about them. The early poets certainly. The early poets were people – it depended which side they were on. [*Audience member asks about Pasternak and Mayakovsky.*] Well, Pasternak was very different from Mayakovsky. Mayakovsky felt himself called upon to be the tribune and the herald of the rising world order. The poem on Lenin, and

the poem called [...] and so on, you see, all those things were – he saw himself as a great trumpet which was going to trumpet forth the world revolution [...]. No doubt about that. He had a strong sense of the mission of a poet, somewhat differently interpreted from the way in which it was done in the nineteenth century, in a violent, slightly hooliganish, arrogant, rude-awakening fashion.

Pasternak was somewhat more complicated. Pasternak, before the revolution happened – he saw it as a cosmic event, he saw it as something elemental, he saw it as something unintelligible, he saw it as something beyond reason, something which could not be explained in terms of ordinary rational [...], and he accepted it as a vast elemental force which the poet was forced to bow to and to interpret. But he never committed himself to it as a tribune of it. He was never a propagandist for it. He didn't see himself as an instrument embodying certain new revolutionary values as against the old, and always stood aside [...] from events at all times, before [...] and after.

The poets of the last years: I simply don't know. I think they simply see themselves as voices of youth, sometimes voices of protest, at other times simply voices of the new youth culture, inspired by Hemingway, inspired by Vachel Lindsay, inspired by the noisier American poets, the noisier American writers into simply expressing their own unrivalled, rich, new, healthy, vigorous, barbarous natures in a loud and memorable manner. Absolutely. Mandel'stam believed in art, Mandel'stam believed in beauty, Mandel'stam believed that if you [...] poet you have to write poetry. [*Inaudible intervention from the audience.*] Mandel'stam's principle object was simply to write poetry. As a citizen he may have accepted or rejected the revolution. He wasn't either a revolutionary or a counter-revolutionary poet. Mandel'stam believed in art above all, and salvation by art, and when the state became the kind of state that it did become, and it began to persecute him and other poets, and declared itself against the kind of art which he believed in, and insisted upon stamping upon him all kinds of restrictions and issued all kinds of [...] which seemed to him to vulgarise and crush any artistic impulse which anyone

might have, he of course protested against it. But as a poet, what he believed in was simply producing poetry, and nothing else at all, and resisted only when he felt that his integrity and his personality as a poet were being savaged by the regime. But he protested against the belief that he would [...] was the function of poetry to utter – to behave politically at all. I doubt if he would have said that it was. On the contrary, he would have said that the orders to poets to politicise themselves were in themselves absolute death to art.

Let me tell you a story in this connection, if I may. Pasternak, whom I knew, once told me that in 1934 – I don't know if this really happened, but this was his story – in 1934 he was informed that there was an anti-Fascist Congress in Paris to which he was summoned to come. Men appeared with some kind of morning coat and top hat, which was then thought to be the proper attire for a poet appearing in Western Europe, he was put in an aeroplane and sent to Paris. He appeared on the platform that evening in Paris. There was there – I think Dreiser was probably presiding – a great many writers, E. M. Forster, Dreiser, Rebecca West, all kinds of people [...] all kinds of people [...] almost every liberal writer in the world of any eminence. [...] perfectly good liberal assemblage. And Pasternak appeared before them and said: 'I understand that you are here to organise the fight against Fascism. Naturally, you know what my views about Fascism were likely to be. Nevertheless, let me tell you one thing. Do not organise. All organisation is the death of art.' And sat down.

INAUDIBLE QUESTION [...].

BERLIN I couldn't deny that. I wasn't trying to explain the course of Russian history in terms of the influence of historicism on a group of Russian intellectuals. What I was trying to do was merely to say that there were more persons addicted to, or under the influence of, these historicist notions than there were in any other country, and these people were on the whole, in the end, because they believed in this so fanatically, highly effective. Once they were

THE RUSSIAN OBSESSION WITH HISTORY AND HISTORICISM

in power they behaved exactly like any other group in power behaves in relation to the circumstances which surround them, but [...] any forces which they regarded as hostile. But even so, even under the pressure of what you quite correctly say – poverty, intervention and all the rest of it – an element of fanatical historicism lingered. That is to say, for example, their policy with regard to China, the failure to support the Communists at a certain stage, was due to the fact they had a theory of history in accordance with which certain events had to come first, certain events had to come later. And therefore, at that moment, the book said that nationalism is supported. The fact that, for example, the Communists in Germany in, say, 1932 were instructed to vote in the plebiscite as they did, and were ordered not to collaborate with the Social Democrats against the Nazis, was due to a dogmatic, historicist view that there were certain situations which were called revolutionary and certain situations which were non-revolutionary. In non-revolutionary situations you created a popular front, in revolutionary situations you exacerbated existing disorders because they could work only in your [...]. I'm not at the moment saying anything for or against these things, only that they spring from an addiction to an absolutely dogmatic historical theory about the order in which events are inevitably bound to proceed. And this seems to me a heritage from the nineteenth century. I dare say they've shaken themselves free of it now, but it's taken a very long time.

INAUDIBLE QUESTION [...].

BERLIN Let me see. I have thought of particularly [...]. It's perfectly true that the white man's burden in Kipling, the general imperialist mystique of the 1890s, is a genuine form – a rather feeble form, but a form – of historicism. But that occurs only when imperialism comes under attack. It didn't occur in the eighteenth century, it didn't occur in the early nineteenth. When the empire was being created, when England was at the height of its power, which is in the 1860s and 1870s, it didn't need a theory or doctrine

THE RUSSIAN OBSESSION WITH HISTORY AND HISTORICISM

or myth in order to sustain it. The myth came later. It's only when attacks are made upon it, and when it wasn't quite so certain, when a certain amount of guilt ensued, and when people began wondering whether all this power was being wisely used, or wisely controlled, and by what right. They held down various native populations that by this time were beginning to resist such a [...]. The same thing occurs, I should have thought, in the case of America – I am less familiar with the facts, and I can't tell you, but I agree with you. I don't think it's an absolutely necessary condition for being inspired by historicist myths that you should be backward. My position is the opposite, that if you *are* backward, you are liable to use these myths as a prop or an incentive. But that people in non-inferior positions feel themselves empowered to march forward if some convenient myth drives them forward [...], as you say, manifest destiny or the American century, or things of that kind – that this actually does happen is, of course, not to be denied. I am not saying that countries in [...] power never have these myths; only that countries which are not in [...] power and need to get somewhere, because they feel an enormous [...] of state and some degree of puzzlement, some degree of ignorance about how to use this – these people seem to be most liable to fall under the domination of those myths.

INAUDIBLE INTERVENTION [...].

BERLIN Yes, I see that. Yes. Still. But yes.

SINEL I think maybe we can have one more question. I think it was ...

INAUDIBLE QUESTION [...].

BERLIN [...] anyway that they do. That would involve, no doubt, taking into account a very great many factors. I was confining myself only to the rather narrow question of when are these – what kind of situations are the situations in which historicist models

THE RUSSIAN OBSESSION WITH HISTORY AND HISTORICISM
particularly appeal to a community, whatever the other factors
involved may be. It is quite obviously true that no country behaves
wholly and exclusively [...]. [*Recording ends as tape runs out.*]

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