



## **The Russian Preoccupation with History (BBC 1974)**

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# The Russian Preoccupation with History

Isaiah Berlin spoke on this subject on numerous occasions, four of which have yielded a text. On 17 December 1962 the Russian Research Center at Harvard hosted a talk and discussion on ‘The Addiction of Russian Intellectuals to Historicism’, transcribed [here](#). ‘The Russian Preoccupation with Historicism’, transcribed [here](#), was a lecture given and recorded at the University of Sussex in 1967. The recording, the original of which is held by the University of Sussex Library, may be heard [here](#). Next, Berlin delivered the second Dal Grauer Memorial Lecture, ‘The Russians’ Obsession with History and Historicism’, at Totem Park, University of British Columbia, on 2 March 1971, and again a [recording](#) is available. Finally, there was the present BBC talk, recorded on 14 December 1973, transmitted on Radio 3 on 24 July 1974 (and repeated on 17 March 1975), and on 29 October 1975 by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation as ‘The Russian Obsession with History’: a 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 talk below appeared under the subheading ‘History’ in ‘Out of the Year’, *Listener*, 19 and 26 December 1974, 830.<sup>1</sup>

MY SUBJECT is the Russian preoccupation with history, or rather with patterns of history, with historicism, with the laws of history, with the idea that history is subject to an inexorable and inevitable pattern, through which all human groups, nations, cultures must necessarily go. I do not of course mean that all Russians believed this, or were influenced by it; I refer only to some rather central figures in the nineteenth century, who created an atmosphere in which later intellectual developments occurred, culminating in the

<sup>1</sup> ‘Sir Isaiah Berlin spoke of the concern for “History” manifested by nineteenth-century and twentieth-century Russians – and, comparably, by developing nations in Asia and Africa: “There obviously is some deep connection between being technologically inferior and looking to history to see what one can do. In some way, history offers a prop. It offers some kind of encouragement to proceed in a certain direction, which successful societies don’t feel because they can simply ask themselves what is the rational thing to do, without particularly bothering about alleged patterns to which they look as some kind of salvation.”’ See p. [13](#).

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Russian Revolution – an atmosphere in which the ideology of the Revolution found it particularly easy to flourish. Let me begin by trying to explain the situation in Russia itself, as I see it, in which these ideas developed.

First of all one might ask: Why do people study history at all? There are many motives for this. Sometimes it is just a question of solidarity amongst a community. We are all the sons of Cadmus; we all come from Troy; we are all the children of Abraham; we are all descended from some mythical dragon; therefore we are all brothers and we all belong to the same group of mankind. That is certainly one of the most powerful motives for believing in history, both mythological and genuine.

Then of course there are patriotic reasons. There is the sense of past glory which buoys us up in difficult moments. There is the sense of the voices of our ancestors, of the great national tradition to which a given society feels it belongs, or wants to belong.

Then there is the whole notion that history is somehow a school for morals, that it shows human beings in the past behaving in various ways from which one can draw certain lessons for the present. It shows virtue and vice. This is the kind of thing which Leibniz and Voltaire, and, indeed, Thucydides and Hume and Buckle and all kinds of philosophers of history and historians, certainly supposed themselves to be studying history for.

Then there is the motive of simply collecting material for a natural science, say sociology, just historical material for the purpose of discovering whether there are not some laws which govern human history, much as laws govern nature.

There is also the question of what constitutes progress and what constitutes reaction – the sort of way in which Voltaire studied history, to show humanity in its finest or brightest hours, as against its darkest and worst hours, so as to attract people to ideal modes of behaviour, to set a beacon of progress before them and contrast that with moments of retrogression and barbarism.

There is also the view of history as a kind of drama, perhaps a great divine play in which all kinds of mysterious periods succeed

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each other – the story of God's word to man, the way in which human history is conducted by its divine maker.

The sense in which the Russians whose names I am about to mention took an interest in history is not quite any of these. They were chiefly influenced by that school of German historical philosophy which developed towards the end of the eighteenth century, in accordance with which men were made what they were by belonging to societies, and these societies in turn developed organically as plants or animals do, in accordance with certain discoverable laws or principles; and what a man was depended largely on the kind of society to which he belonged. The very idea of belonging, the very idea that a man develops most fruitfully and most happily amongst people with whom he is in some special way associated – by means of kinship, by means of common culture, by means of common language, by means of common memories – the idea that people only develop properly in the midst of their own proper culture, which the German philosopher Herder was chiefly responsible for propagating, that was the sense of history which particularly influenced the Russians. You may ask: Which Russians, and why?

Let me begin by explaining that very few, if any, ideas outside the realms of natural science, and outside, perhaps, art itself, were born on Russian soil. For the most part Russians borrowed ideas from the West and then took them very seriously, and in taking them very seriously altered them. Nothing alters ideas so profoundly as being taken with utter seriousness by people who believe in them and try to lead their lives accordingly; and when these ideas were transformed simply by the deep faith in them which these people had, they ricocheted back to Europe, apparently in a new guise. This is what happened with certain ideas of socialism, and it happened also with ideas of history. Here was this great country, full of untried energy, with a tiny educated class, with a small bureaucracy trying to govern a huge, ignorant peasant population, living in a condition of semi-barbarism, ignorance and squalor. It was removed from the main currents of Western

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civilisation by the Great Schism which bound it to the Greek Church, and precipitated into Europe by the invasion of Napoleon. It was feared and admired by Europe, admired for its vast strength as the greatest material power in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and at the same time despised as a great mass of uneducated barbarians, Cossacks. Russians were themselves filled with pride at their magnificent repulsion of the great French conqueror, whom nobody had before managed so utterly to defeat, and at the same time terribly conscious of their barbarism, their ignorance, their lack of education in comparison with the great educated countries of Germany and France, through which the victorious Russians marched in 1814 and 1815. If you can imagine that, you can also easily conceive that these people looked to the West for such culture, such civilisation as could be obtained, in a mood, as I say, at once of envy and pride. They felt inferior culturally, but at the same time nervous of being over-despised, resentful about being regarded as a huge barbarian mass – in a mixed mood, in other words, of envy and resentment.

The kinds of ideas which were prevalent in the West at this period sprang largely out of what is normally called the romantic movement. I do not propose to try to summarise this movement in the little time that I have before me. Let me confine myself to this: One of the central concepts of the romantic movement was that every man and every human group had a goal for which it was created, an end or mission, to fulfil which was its very essence, its very nature; that it was perfectly proper for such human groups, more particularly nations or cultures, to ask themselves what would fulfil them most richly, what was the quintessence of their nature, and in what particular direction were they intended by that nature to flower. This was perhaps a notion that was born of a certain degree of inferiority, particularly in the case of the Germans, who felt humiliated by the French throughout the late sixteenth century and the seventeenth century. The Germans felt themselves to be both materially and culturally inferior to the dominant French, and were sooner or later to ask themselves whether they really were as

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poor a people as they were evidently thought to be by their triumphant Western neighbours, the French, and to some extent the English; and they naturally came up, as do all human groups which are despised or patronised for too long, with the notion that they could not be as inferior as they were thought to be, that they too had their place in the world, they too had some goal for which God or nature had created them – perhaps a superior goal, perhaps a higher destiny than that which these mocking, successful civilisations evidently prided themselves on.

The Russians were even more deeply in this condition. The first thinker to ask himself this question was an interesting man called Peter Chaadaev, a guards officer, an elegant, handsome, rather arrogant man, a friend of the great poet Pushkin, exceedingly well educated, who travelled abroad, read French and German easily, and was fascinated at once by German metaphysics and by the then current Masonic and other religious and quasi-religious movements. Some time after the terrible trauma of the failure of the Decembrist revolt against the Tsar, in which he was obliquely implicated, Chaadaev asked himself: What do we exist for? What is the purpose of the Russian nation? In the late 1830s he wrote a famous series of *Philosophical Letters*, of which only one was printed, in which he said: What is our goal? Where are we going? We know what Western culture is: it is a magnificent human achievement, from the days of the Greeks and the Romans onwards; first Greece, then Rome, then the Great Roman Church, which preserved the cultural conquests and attainments of the classical age. This is the great model, this is the true culture to which all human beings naturally wish to attain. What about us? What do we have? When we look at our past we discover almost nothing. Here we are, wandering Slav tribes. And after our wanderings, what? Pale imitators of Byzantium in a period of decline, and then what? The Tatar yoke, which crushed us and humiliated us and brutalised us, and then what? The tsars of Muscovy, Ivan the Terrible, arbitrary tyranny, cruelty, blood, the knout, and then what? The eighteenth century, Peter the Great were nothing but tame

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imitators of the West, aping and parroting Western values without fully understanding them. That is our past. In short, our past is contemptible, there is nothing in it, it is empty. What are we? We are nothing but a blank page on which anybody who wishes chooses to write whatever he wishes. And what is to be our future? Who can tell? Why were we created? Every other nation has achieved something, but we, where is our literature? Where is our art? Where is our great past achievement on which we can look with pride? Perhaps we are simply a caution created by God to warn other nations of what not to do, where not to go.

One can imagine that this terrible self-lacerating letter, denouncing Russia for being culturally null, produced shock, and indignation, indeed, in some of his contemporaries. The Church and the state were equally indignant, and the Emperor Nicholas I caused Chaadaev to be pronounced mad, confined to his house, visited by a doctor weekly – a punishment which has since then not been entirely unknown in the case of other cultural dissidents. Chaadaev was the first of these. His importance is this: that he was the first person to pose certain questions to which the rest of nineteenth-century Russian thought and literature is to some degree one great continuous answer. The note of breast-beating, the note of self-denigration, plus the questions ‘Whither are we going? What is to be the future of Russia? What is the destiny of Russia?’, became obsessive to the whole of the Russian nineteenth century. Almost every Russian novelist writes about what it is to be Russian, castigates Russian vices, celebrates Russian virtues, and is invariably preoccupied with the question of what Russia is, what it ought to be, where it ought to go. When the Russian writer Korolenko at the beginning of the twentieth century said ‘Russian literature became my homeland’,<sup>2</sup> everybody knew what he meant.

<sup>2</sup> **‘Я нашел тогда свою родину, и этой родиной стала прежде всего русская литература.’** Literally: ‘I discovered my own homeland, and that homeland became, above all, Russian literature.’ *Istoriya moego sovremennika*, chapter 27: V. G. Korolenko, *Sobranie sochinenii v pyati tomakh* (Leningrad, 1989–91), iv 270.

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He meant that it is Russian literature, with its obsessive self-criticism, with its questions of what Russia should be, why Russia was what it was, that is the natural home of self-conscious critical Russian thought. It would not have meant anything if, say, Somerset Maugham said ‘English literature became my homeland.’ Nobody would have known what Anatole France meant if he had said ‘French literature became my homeland.’ But in the case of Russia it was perfectly plain what these people meant. The revolutionary Alexander Herzen said that Russian literature is simply one enormous, continuous indictment of Russian life. This is begun by Chaadaev.

Let me explain that it is countries which feel themselves inferior, which feel that they have a great deal of health and strength and no culture to lean on, countries which were brought up by a Church with no real intellectual tradition, which is what happened in the case of the Greek Orthodox Church – lives of saints, holy living, yes, but no great scholastic tradition like that of the Roman Church – countries therefore which come to the feast of European nations lacking those intellectual and cultural qualities which they feel they ought to contribute, and therefore feel inferior – it is countries like this which are inevitably forced to ask themselves: What is to become of us? Where are we going? This is not done by successful societies. You do not find Dickens saying: Whither England? You do not find Stendhal saying: Whither France? But almost every Russian writer is preoccupied with this kind of question. Russian novels, Russian poetry are filled with it, and Chaadaev is the first person to sound this note, to put forward what were later called the ‘accursed questions’<sup>3</sup> of Russian life, with which any responsible Russian was expected to cope.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Proklyatyte voprosy’. Although ‘voprosy’ was widely used by the 1830s to refer to the social questions that preoccupied the Russian intelligentsia, it seems that the specific phrase ‘proklyatyte voprosy’ was coined in 1858 by Mikhail L. Mikhailov when he used it to render ‘die verdammten Fragen’ in his translation of Heine’s poem ‘*Zum Lazarus*’ (1853/4) no. 1: see ‘Stikhotvoreniya Geine’, *Sovremennik* 1858 no 3 (March), 125; and *Heinrich Heines Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Oskar Walzel (Leipzig, 1911–29), iii 225. Alternatively, Mikhailov



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Once the question was posed, it could no longer be avoided; and one of the natural ways of answering was to look in history. Perhaps by looking at the past of European nations, or of Russia herself, we shall discover some pattern which will tell us what the next step is. This is quite a natural thing to believe, particularly if you are under the influence of a Romantic conception of history, historicism, in the way in which many German thinkers were – of course in the first instance Hegel, but also opponents of Hegel such as the historical lawyers of Germany, who believed that laws were created out of the gradual organic growth of custom underneath the crust or surface of life, and that within this organic growth a pattern could be traced which was due to history itself, against which one must not proceed, because our very natures are made what they are by the peculiarities of our historical development.

If that is the kind of movement, the kind of vision of life, which is prevalent, there is nothing more natural than that the Russians should ask themselves: And we, what is *our* pattern? What should we be doing? And then there is disagreement. On the one hand there are the so-called Slavophiles, who say: Yes, there is a pattern of life, we know what to do, because we are not as other nations are. Someone like Ivan Kireevsky or Khomyakov – these are semi-theological Russian philosophers of history – explains: We must not imitate the West, the West is decadent, the West is rotting. The French Revolution was a condign punishment upon the strayings of the West, as some Western Catholic thinkers, Maistre, Bonald and others, have quite rightly said. The West was developed by a mechanical despotic pattern, of which the Roman Church is the now somewhat degenerate embodiment. The free human spirit caught by this great bureaucratic order, this huge pyramid which the Roman Church constitutes, was stifled, and squeezed into compartments in which nothing truly creative, nothing truly

may have been capitalising on the fact that an existing Russian expression fitted Heine's words like a glove, but I have not yet seen an earlier published use of it.

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spontaneous, nothing truly human could properly develop except in a rather constricted and maimed way.

The revolt against the Roman Church by the Protestants was quite natural, but that went to the opposite extreme. Instead of at least some collective, united movement of mankind, which, after all, the Roman Church had promoted during the unified Christendom of the Middle Ages, we now have nothing but an atomised individualism in which each man stands for himself, in which each man jealously guards his own privacy against others, in which men do not behave like brothers, men do not behave with love and affection for each other, but with suspicious protection of their rights. Any talk of rights always means that a society of this kind is in some way disintegrated: men erect walls against each other instead of that loving society which is the true goal of men, and which only the Orthodox Church, which was free from the ossifying influence of the Roman Church, free from the disintegrating influence of the Reformation, managed to realise. It is within the Orthodox Church that spontaneity, the free human spirit, creativity can truly assert themselves. Therefore if you say ‘What is the fate of Russia? Which way must we develop?’, we must look to the Greek Fathers of the Church. We must look to the origins of Christianity in Byzantium. We must look to this particular pattern which allows for the free and loving development of men who are not subject to some destructive and ossifying political framework, under which the nations of the West are at present groaning. That was the Slavophil sermon.

Against this the Westernisers said: Not at all, our condition is fearful. Chaadaev was perfectly right. All we have is serfdom, ignorance, lack of resources, poverty, oppression, arbitrariness at the top, obsequiousness from below. On the contrary, we must learn from the West. Every nation goes through the same stages of development, but we are at a very primitive and very early stage of it. We must therefore go through those stages which the West has already gone through, and by means of which it has developed its splendid civilisation. We are barbarians knocking at the door, and

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unless we go through all the stages which the West has gone through, how can we ever reach their level of development in science, in politics, in art, in every province of the human spirit in which we are quite obviously so lacking?

Some thinkers, obsessed by this, asked themselves rather wistfully: Need we go through all the most painful stages of Western progress? Must we go through all the horrors of the Industrial Revolution, all the exploitation and degradation of human beings which quite evidently happened in England towards the end of the eighteenth century, and is happening there now? Must we really go through this? Or is it perhaps possible in some way to circumnavigate this? Is it possible for our village communes to enter into advanced technology without going through the terrible intermediate hell of the frightful exploitation, the terrible human cost through which the Western nations in the course of their industrial development seem to have gone?

These questions, quite apart from what the answers to them are, are all set in what might be called a historical framework. The assumption always is: If we can only discover what the pattern of history is, then we shall understand ourselves, understand where we belong, understand what the next move is. If we do not attend to these historical patterns we shall make terrible mistakes. It is only by understanding what is the proper ladder of human development that we shall know which rung we are on, and if we do not ask this question then we might very well try to get on to some wrong rung, some rung which has already been passed or some rung which we are not yet mature enough to be able to get on to, and this will surely lead to disaster. The only way in which we can progress properly is by understanding the reality with which we are dealing; and this reality is historically conditioned. This notion of a ladder, this notion that there are certain stages, that we must know what stage we have arrived at – Are we at stage twelve or are we at stage seventy-four? What is the next move objectively dictated to us by the very movement of history? – this is something which becomes quite obsessive among certain thinkers in Russia.

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Of course these things were discussed in the West also; I do not mean to say they were not. But there it was to some extent simply books written by various thinkers, conversations in intellectual salons; it did not really make a difference to what might be called the central thought or even action of these countries. In Russia it does seem to me to have done so. Take a very central thinker in Russian social thought, the literary critic Vissarion Belinsky. Belinsky really lived his intellectual ideas in a very painful and very agonised fashion. This is characteristic of the kind of Russian intellectuals of whom I speak: they really took ideas with utter seriousness.

Belinsky began by supposing that the Russians were ill-educated, unformed, immature, and therefore that the monarchy, the paternalistic despotism of Nicholas I, is all that barbarians of this kind could for the moment expect, because if they were liberated they would create chaos. This is roughly what a number of reactionary foreign thinkers like Maistre said about Russia, and that is how Belinsky began. Then he moved from this to the idea, derived from the German metaphysicians, that perhaps empirical life, everyday life, was of no importance. What mattered was the life of the spirit, which soared above everyday life, and if one could live in some ideal world, of which Fichte had spoken, of which the playwright and philosopher Schiller had spoken, then that is all that a man who really sought to understand the truth, who sought to realise all the potentialities within him, could do – and he could ignore the life of the masses, the life of the philistine bourgeoisie, which could not attain to such heights. But being a man of acute conscience, being a man extremely sensitive to the sufferings of others and with an extremely developed sense of moral responsibility for the misfortunes and the injustices experienced by others, he could not long linger in this condition.

He then crossed over to a Hegelian position. According to his understanding of Hegel, if one understood history properly then all the things which one normally condemned, all the injustices, all the horrors, all the cruelties, all the abominations of history, Philip

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II of Spain, the Inquisition, the brutalities, the injustices of tyrants – all these things could be seen to be inevitable stages in the ascent of mankind. Once you understood that these things could not be avoided, not only did you comprehend why they happened, but you also saw that they were all indispensable to the higher harmony towards which mankind was striving; and you ceased to resist them, you ceased to denounce them, you ceased to kick against them. To understand was to accept. And for a time Belinsky tried to justify all the abominations and horrors, as they seemed to him before, of Russian history, and indeed of the history of other nations also, on the ground that if one ascended to a higher vantage point one could see that all these apparent disharmonies, all these clashes, all these phenomena which seemed so ugly and so discordant if you saw them by themselves without relating them to other phenomena, were in fact ingredients of a higher harmony, and seen in the larger context of the whole of history they were clearly necessary elements in the ultimate self-understanding, self-liberation and triumph of the human spirit. For this reason it was childish, it was uneducated, it was un-grown-up simply to kick against these necessary pricks.

But of course, being a man of extreme sensibility, being a man of tender conscience, being a man, ultimately, who could not bear to stifle his moral intuitions too strongly, Belinsky rebelled against this and said in the end that he could not accept it, that he was not prepared, for the sake of some historical theory, to condone all the brutalities and the horrors, to see his brothers rolling about in the mud, to see all the blood and the injustice and the fearful vices and abominations of Russian society around him, simply because some philosopher or other said that this was necessary for the sake of some higher ideal. To the devil with the higher ideal: what one must do is to cure the immediate pains, the immediate sufferings on earth.

I am talking about Belinsky not so much because of the intrinsic interest of his own ideas, but because this was not familiar in the West. Belinsky tried to live his ideas, he tried to coerce his own

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consciousness, he tried to impose upon himself a new attitude towards human beings, towards art, towards literature, for which he cared most deeply, towards the political structure, towards moral and social ideas. He tried to force them into the framework of what on other grounds he believed to be correct; and the more difficult, the more painful, the more against his whole nature it was, the more he believed he had to do it. It is only if you force yourself to accept conclusions which appear unpalatable that you show true intellectual seriousness, true moral courage. This was typically Russian in some ways; and the fact that he rejected it, in the end, was simply creditable to his heart and to his moral consciousness.

You do not find comparable phenomena in the West, perhaps because the West was successful and Russia was backward. When a Russian thinker like Belinsky, or Herzen, at one period of his life at least, tries to justify a given reform or a given course of action, is in favour of reform against revolution, or revolution against reform, he tries to justify it on historical grounds. He says: This is the pattern of history; we have reached stage thirty-four, and therefore the next steps are thirty-five and thirty-six; we cannot do step sixty-two until we have been through the forties and the fifties, or through all the rungs of the ladder.

You do not find that in the West. You do not find John Stuart Mill, or somebody of that sort, if he is in favour of a reform, saying: What stage of history have we reached? Where is England on the ladder of progress? You do not even get so passionate and so Germanic a thinker as Carlyle asking this. When Michelet denounces the Jesuits or Napoleon III, he does not do it in the name of the fact that we have reached stage seventeen and the next stage in the ascent of mankind must be stage eighteen. He does it simply because he thinks that Napoleon III is a tyrant, or because he thinks the Jesuits are monsters of some kind; and when Mill or Carlyle or Gladstone, whoever it might be, speaks about this or that as having to be done, the arguments are political, empirical, moral, but not historical in character.

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This reliance on history, this attempt to make history the authority, is an attempt to convert history into a theodicy, to substitute the historical pattern for what, in earlier days, had been a religious revelation, or the authority of a Church which in Russia had evidently grown weak and somewhat compromised by its ignorance and its subservience to the state.

After Belinsky, we find someone like Chernyshevsky, who was a radical, a revolutionary thinker, and who says: Can we circumnavigate the industrial regime? Could we go straight from the village commune to some form of the socialism which we believe in? His reply is somewhat ambivalent. He says: No, we must go through the same stages as the West. We are not peculiar, we are not unique. What the Slavophiles say about our uniqueness, because we are not Catholics or Protestants – all this is nothing to do with the case. The factors which dominate history are economic and material, not religious and spiritual in the first place. He does think that, as a matter of fact, one can circumnavigate these factors, but only if certain steps are taken.

Herzen, on the other hand, says: Has history a libretto? Is there some scenario here? Do we have to obey it? He ends by saying no, he does not think history does have a libretto. No, the human will, voluntarism, is more important. We cannot confine history within the framework of our own puny historical theories.

It does not so much matter what these people say, whether you believe in a historical pattern, as Chernyshevsky does, or try to deny it in the name of free voluntary action by individuals, convinced of the value of the goals which they pursue, like Herzen. It does not so much matter which it is they say. The point is that they always have to come to terms with historicism. They always have to answer the question one way or the other, in a way in which Western thinkers do not evidently appear to have to do.

Chernyshevsky develops the theory that backwardness may have its own advantages. This comes from Chaadaev himself. The very man who denounced Russia for being nothing but darkness, barbarism and the knout, after being pronounced mad, wrote

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another book called *Apologie d'un fou* (*Apology of a Madman*), in which he said: Maybe I was mistaken. Maybe God has created Russia for a special fate. Maybe the fact that we are backward means that we are fresh, we are young, we are unexhausted; perhaps we shall be able to profit by the attainments of the decaying West, in the way in which the West is too feeble to do. Chernyshevsky takes up this theme and seizes it. So do other Russian thinkers. Perhaps there is a certain virtue in backwardness. One need not go through all the agonies of, say, industrialism in order to profit by its results. One need not invent the machinery oneself. One need not make a lot of labourers unemployed and cause all the fearful social suffering which this entails. One need not have the labourers at all; perhaps one can use the latest products of European industrialism and graft them on to our system, which fortunately has no proletariat. Perhaps we can do without creating proletarians. Perhaps the peasant society can in some way centralise itself sufficiently to be able to use the industrial attainments of the West.

So it goes on; and this theory that backwardness is of a certain value, because there are certain inexorable stages, but you are allowed to pluck the fruit of a tree grown by other people, becomes their obsessive theme. First Chernyshevsky says it, then people say it towards the end of the nineteenth century, people say it in the twentieth century, and finally contemporary thinkers like Isaac Deutscher say it, and a great many developing nations in Africa and in Asia believe in exactly that, even now. In fact there obviously is some deep connection between being technologically inferior and looking to history to see what one can do. History offers a prop. It offers encouragement to proceed in a certain direction, which successful societies do not feel they need, because they can simply ask themselves what is the rational thing to do, without particularly bothering about alleged patterns to which they might look as a salvation.

You find this particular reliance upon history at all stages of Russian social thought in the mid nineteenth century. For example, there is quite an interesting argument in the 1870s between two



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revolutionaries, Tkachev and Lavrov, about what one should do about bringing about a Russian revolution. Tkachev, who does not really much believe in history, who is a kind of Jacobin, who believes in creating a small professional revolutionary elite and making a revolution when and as we can, says: The peasants cannot help us. Peasants are reactionary and stupid. They will always betray us. The only way to make a revolution in Russia, to stop the injustice and the inefficiency that is going on, is by a small, properly trained body of revolutionaries who will organise a revolt and impose it upon the population, whether it likes it or not, for its benefit, but without its help.

But Lavrov, who is a gradualist, argues historically. He says: But this cannot be; this would be making a revolution before we are ready. This is premature. If we do this you will find that, in order to defend ourselves against the inevitable counter-revolution of the very peasants for whose benefit we have made the revolution, but who may not appreciate its value, you have to arm yourselves, you will have to impose a yoke upon them, you will have to coerce them. In the course of this you will brutalise yourself. In the course of fighting off the counter-revolutionaries you will turn yourself into the very kind of despot whom you are now, with every justice, trying to destroy in Russia. Until enough Russians have understood what the virtues of the new system, of the socialist system, are, until they have become educated, until history itself has moved forward to the point at which a revolution is possible, we must not do it. This is a direct appeal to history; and this is what Engels says – nothing is worse than a premature revolution, because that must inevitably lead to despotism.

So it is again when Bakunin – who does not believe in history, who believes in simply destroying the hated system and then trusting to the natural goodness and spontaneity of human nature, with the chains knocked off, to create a happier and freer universe – is attacked by Herzen, who says: This will not do. History has its own tempo, which you must observe. You cannot build a home for free men out of the bricks from which a prison-house was

built.<sup>4</sup> If you liberate them too soon you will find that the petit-bourgeois values against which you are operating, the very philistinism, the horrors which you are trying to eliminate, will be reasserted by the victors, who will have been brought up by these same philistines and philistine ideas; until they have been internally liberated they will not create a free world.

What I wish to stress is that the argument always proceeds along historicist lines, in terms of there being some sort of clock. One has to know which hour has been reached. The whole notion of putting the clock back, not going too far forward, this whole notion obsesses the Russians: the notion of a ladder, the notion of certain rungs as following each other in an inexorable order, the calendar which we must not anticipate.

So you can imagine that when Marxism finally came upon the European scene, it found a marvellously fertile soil in Russia, of all countries, which had already been prepared by this obsession with historical notions. Marxism was particularly congenial because not only did it emphasise what Russians of both the right and the left tended to believe – both right-wing historians like Chicherin and left-wing revolutionaries like Chernyshevsky, though they might hate each other, equally accepted the patterns of history – not only did it look like a powerful economic argument in favour of this pattern of discoverable laws of human progress, but it also tied them to the notion of natural science, towards which the Russians were naturally extremely respectful. It also promised a happy ending, and it also gave very good arguments, even better arguments than before, for loathing the irrational, oppressive and

<sup>4</sup> Herzen wrote that the French radicals of 1848 ‘want, without altering the walls [of the prison], to give them a new function, as if a plan for a jail could be used for a free existence’ (‘хотят, не меняя стен, дать им иное назначение, как будто план острога может годиться для свободной жизни’), ‘**S togo berega**’ [‘From the Other Shore’], chapter 3, A. I. Gertsen [Herzen], *Sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* (Moscow, 1954–66) vi 51; Alexander Herzen, *From the Other Shore*, trans. Moura Budberg, and *The Russian People and Socialism*, trans. Richard Wollheim, with an introduction by Isaiah Berlin (London, 1956) 57.

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arbitrary government which was restraining Russian society from realising its full potential and attaining to rationality and freedom.

It was immediately, of course, opposed by those who were frightened of the idea of rigorous determinism. The socialist critic Mikhailovsky said: I do not wish to be the toe of the foot of some enormous giant called history, so that I have no liberty at all, so that I am operated by *it*, so that I do not choose but am chosen for, so that I have no real liberty of action but am simply a cog in some vast machine. Darwin, Marx tell me this, but it is not true. There is such a thing as human freedom, there is the human will. All the greatest attainments of mankind were made by men who operated in a free medium, not coerced into it, not conditioned into it, not determined by some vast pattern from which they could not escape.

The Marxist Plekhanov argued against that, and said: Not at all. There is an absolutely rigorous order of historical progress, and we have now reached the point at which Russian capitalism is emerging. Instead of trying to circumnavigate it, which is naive and impossible, we must help it along. We must in fact almost egg on capitalism, so that the ultimate destruction of capitalism, which is equally inevitable, occurs sooner. Capitalists, as Marx said, are their own gravediggers. The more rapidly they develop in our backward country, the more rapidly they will dig their own graves. Therefore, so far from obstructing them, as various populists and people with agricultural mystiques want to do, for fear of the growth of the capitalist system, we must on the contrary hurry them on, help them. This of course was a very bitter pill to swallow for people who said: How can we help our own exploiters? You are asking us actually to assist in the process of exploitation, of creating a proletariat? Yes, said Plekhanov: no proletariat, no revolution. That is what Marx said, and Marx, if you read his works, is perfectly right: there is no avoiding his conclusions.

There was a crisis in the Russian Socialist Democratic Party as a result of this. The free will problem, to which I have now come, has, of course, always obsessed individual thinkers. But it never

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became an issue for a political party to the degree to which it did in Russia. Individual philosophers might be troubled about it, individual men, but there were Russian Social Democrats who said: If history is inevitable, if the stages follow each other with absolutely irreversible necessity, then why should we risk our lives, and certainly our liberties, in fighting against the regime which kills us, and sends us to Siberia, and maims us, and arrests us, and obstructs us in every way, if it is going to happen anyhow? Maybe it will take a little longer, but why should we take these vast risks for a conclusion which history will furnish in any case? And the then socialist leader, Struve, actually had to put forward the proposition that while ninety per cent of life was indeed causally determined, ten per cent was free, and within this ten per cent it was possible to make the Revolution.

In no other country did this have to be done. Jules Guesde, the leader of the Marxists in France, Karl Kautsky, the leader of the Marxists in Germany, English socialists – Sydney or Beatrice Webb – were not bothered by the problem of free will. But in Russia, because ideas were taken seriously, and because history was taken seriously, and because, therefore, historical determinism was taken seriously, socialists actually had to be told (it was useful, evidently, to say to them): We are not a hundred per cent determined. There is a realm of freedom in which it is possible for heroes, heroic revolutionaries, to be martyred for the sake of something, and not just for the sake of something which will happen in any case, whether they suffer or not.

So again, the Russian populists wrote letters to Karl Marx in London, and said: Do we have to go through industrialism? Cannot we perhaps achieve socialism by our own methods, by means of the famous peasant commune, the *mir*? At first, of course, Marx did not really want to listen to this, but in the end he conceded that perhaps, under certain conditions, if there was a world revolution or the like, revolutionary activities in Russia might lead to the emergence of a socialist order in Russia, even though they would not have to travel the whole industrial path of the West.

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When Marx made this concession, Plekhanov, who was the leader of the Russian Marxists, thought that this would upset the Party far too much. It would create chaos: people would not any longer accept the central foundation of Marx's socialism, namely the inevitable determination of historical stages by economic development, by the class war. Therefore he actually suppressed the letter. It was published only in 1924. My point is that nowhere in the West would this have been necessary. It would not have been necessary for French socialists or German socialists to suppress a letter by Marx for fear that their party might become demoralised or thrown into confusion. But in Russia these things were taken with the most passionate literalness, and therefore the situation really was spiritually different from that in the West.

It is so even in the case of Lenin, that most faithful disciple of Marx. Lenin was a man of revolutionary temperament, and naturally a man like that would suffer from a certain impatience if he was told that there was quite a long period of industrialisation, during which Russia would have to cease to be an agricultural country, would have to generate a proletariat, which in its turn would have to become the majority of the population, if all the conditions laid down by Marx for a successful socialist revolution were to emerge. And so in 1896, as a young man of twenty-six, Lenin tries to make out that the Russians have already reached this stage. He says: After all, peasants are in some sense capitalists, they are private owners of land; cannot we say that Russia *is* ninety per cent capitalist? Is not that all that Marx ever asked for? Cannot we regard the peasants as capitalists in his sense of the word?

It does not matter about the validity or invalidity of this doctrine. Even Lenin very soon came to realise that what he was saying bore no relation to reality, Marxist or any other. But the very fact that it had to be fitted into the framework of a theory of historical development shows that this is what mattered. It mattered to him in 1905, when the question arose: Shall we or shall we not make a revolution? The question was: Are we ripe or are we not? The very idea of ripeness – the very idea of asking: Have

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we reached 1848 or have we reached 1870? Are we on rung seventeen or are we on rung twenty-three? – is characteristically Russian. When Trotsky, at the beginning of the Revolution, says contemptuously to the socialist leader Martov: You must go to where you belong; the rubbish-heap of history<sup>5</sup> – you are obsolete, in other words; you are no longer relevant to what is going on – the very idea of this rubbish-heap, the very idea that history casts off people to the right and left into obsolete waste-paper baskets, that we have to be of our time, that one can always tell who is backward, who is forward, who is where, presupposes a fairly rigorous historical pattern in terms of which you can classify people. Other people did not talk like this. Even Stalin, as late as 1947, officially at least, executed a certain number of people for, according to him, denying the inexorable economic laws which govern history and indulging in a heresy called voluntarism, which means ignoring or defying these laws of history. In the name of these historical laws you can kill, you can destroy, as you would not be allowed to do in terms of ordinary social morality.

I am not trying to say that every Russian thinker was obsessed in this way by historicism; only that there is a central tradition on both the right and the left which created conditions in which Marxism developed with particular fertility, with particular success, on Russian soil. Of course not all Russian revolutionary thinkers were historicists. Bakunin was not, Pisarev was not, Tkachev was not, Mikhailovsky was not. These people were free of it, but they

<sup>5</sup> The original (variously translated) phrase, ‘pomoinaya yama istorii’, first occurs in the first paragraph of ‘The Collapse of Terror and Its Party (On the Azef Case)’, in L. Trotsky, *Sochineniya* (Leningrad, 1926), iv 345; this article was first published in Polish in 1909, but without this paragraph (because it was less relevant to a Polish readership?). In 1917, according to Nikolay Sukhanov (who was there), Trotsky used the phrase ‘sornaya korzina istorii’, ‘the dustbin of history’, in an anathema on the Mensheviks when they walked out of the Second Congress of Soviets in Petrograd: N. N. Sukhanov, *Zapiski o revolyutsii* (Berlin, 1922–3), vii 203. Trotsky uses the same phrase in his own account of the episode in ‘The Congress of the Soviet Dictatorship’, the last chapter of his *The History of the Russian Revolution (Istoriya russkoi revolyutsii*, Berlin, 1931–3).

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were not central figures; at least, not as central as those who were historicists. Bakunin was the founder of anarchism, but anarchism never really took root in Russia to any profound extent. What took root in Russia was historicist Marxism. Tkachev was a splendid Jacobin figure, but his followers in Russia became fewer and fewer. What really won was the great historical movement culminating in the second Revolution of 1917. Tolstoy was not a historicist. He did not believe in the laws of history in the least, but even he had to come to terms with them – that is my point. In that famous Epilogue to *War and Peace*, in which he discusses the nature of history, he felt that he had to say *something* on the subject, if only to refute what he regarded as the absurd views of bogus Western science, or whatever it was that he regarded it as.

This kind of talk about history – not really about history, but about historicism, about meta-history, about patterns of history, about whether there were laws of history which had to be known in order to make rational progress possible – goes right through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The determinists look on the libertarians as irrationalists, utopians, unrealistic, soft-headed. The libertarians look on the determinists as doctrinaires, people who twist facts in order to fit them into the theory, fanatical men who disregard human issues in order to force the poor resistant human material into a historical framework which is in fact bogus, unreal, simply the fruit of a false metaphysical theory. Russia is the one country in which this battle really has high historical significance. Maybe this is true of backward countries in general. Maybe this is true of countries in Africa and Asia, too, today, all of which ask themselves at what stage industrialism should begin. All the talk of imperatives of industrialisation, of launching-pads in W. W. Rostow's sense, all the talk of going through certain stages, imitating countries which have done it before, asking oneself what stage we have reached and what do we do next, which I am sure Marxist thinkers in Africa and in Asia ask themselves, may actually be the result of a certain relative backwardness, which then

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naturally fastens on to an inevitable historical pattern as something which guarantees ultimate triumph and success.

All I wish to say here, now, is that this preoccupation with the structure of history, quite apart from its validity or invalidity, appears to be peculiar to the Russians, and to ricochet from them to the rest of the world. It comes from the West, of course; it comes from the Germans, it comes from Hegel, it comes from Saint-Simon in France, it comes perhaps even from some of the thinkers of the French Enlightenment. It comes ultimately from the Judaeo-Christian tradition of a theodicy, of mankind historically pursuing certain divine goals. That is where it comes from, but in Russia it takes peculiarly concrete forms, because while in the West it still remains in the realm of theory, something which intellectuals, ideologists, professors discuss, in Russia it is actually lived in the way in which people in the West do not live their ideas – not with that degree of intensity, not with that degree of dedication, and not, one may say, with that degree of practical effect, both successful and disastrous.

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