

REVIEW OF GEORGE L. KLINE,  
*SPINOZA IN SOVIET PHILOSOPHY*

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THIS MONOGRAPH deals with one of the curiosities of contemporary philosophy. Spinoza is to this day highly regarded in the Soviet Union. The fact that he was a rationalist and, in some sense, an atheist in an age of religious intolerance, naturally endeared him to the Soviet authorities, particularly during their early period of militant atheism. But if these are the attributes which gain favour for thinkers one might have thought that others, Hobbes, for instance, or Gassendi, had rather better claims, as militant materialists not committed to the full-blown a priori rationalism of Spinoza. Spinoza's hitherto secure position in a Soviet Pantheon seems mainly due to the accidental fact that Plekhanov, who, by his superior learning and intellectual gifts, intimidated virtually all other Russian Marxists into some degree of conformity, took Spinoza under his special protection, and firmly laid it down that his notion of men as objects in nature made him the father of French materialism of the eighteenth century; that from his sprang Diderot, Helvétius, d'Holbach, etc. and therefore, in due course, also Feuerbach, Marx and Engels. This thesis, once enunciated, was mechanically repeated by later Russian Marxist historians of thought, none of whom seemed aware either that Diderot's essay on Spinoza is by no means an unqualified eulogy of his views, or of the vast differences between Spinoza's and Newton's universes. Mr Kline has conceived the intriguing idea of compiling an account of the successive Soviet attitudes to Spinoza; to show these he has translated, and in this volume printed, seven essays by Soviet specialists on Spinoza, all published in the relatively free period of the 'twenties when ideas could still be discussed. The essays give the impression of conscientious work by Government officials commissioned to produce memoranda on a subject of interest to their superiors; they contain a certain amount of factual information about Spinoza's life and thought, but cast no light upon these subjects. Nevertheless, they are

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interesting as documents and samples of the various brands of materialist criticism as applied to the history of philosophy. In his interesting introduction Mr Kline, after giving a brief (and *prima facie* perfectly adequate) account of pre-Revolutionary Russian philosophical literature on Spinoza, then treats him mainly as a battlefield upon which the principal materialist sects waged wars of mutual extermination. Mr Kline provides lively sketches of the war between the 'Mechanists' and the 'Deborinists', and of the ultimate and inevitable victory of the 'centralist' party, representing the 'general line' of dialectical materialism. All this is of greater interest to students of Soviet ideology than to students of Spinoza. But some of the aberrations of the extreme adherents of economic determinism are entertaining in themselves; there are the views, for instance, of M. Shulyatkov, who thought that Spinoza's philosophy was the 'hymn of triumphant capitalism' of which Holland in the seventeenth century was the leading representative; Spinoza's concept of mind is 'equated' with the functions of the all-centralising, all-organising capitalist, his notion of the body 'corresponds' to the mass of manual workers, and so on. It is true that Lenin did not think highly of this work, nevertheless it was genuinely characteristic of its period and the methods then in vogue. Other Deborinites (subsequently condemned as counter-Revolutionary 'Menshevising Idealists') contrasted Descartes' systematic doubt (corresponding to the unstable position of a French bourgeoisie in the early seventeenth century) with Spinoza's bolder and firmer rationalism (corresponding to the greater self-confidence and optimism of the Dutch bourgeoisie). Against this we have the condemnation of Spinoza by some of the 'Mechanists' (later purged as 'vulgar materialists', incapable of 'dialectical creativeness') for idealism, rationalism, obscurity, lack of social consciousness, and for being a source of inspiration to Mach, Avenarius, Bogdanov and other empiricists and 'psychologists' thundered against by Lenin in his 'Materialism and Empirio-criticism' – surely the worst philosophical work ever to achieve celebrity. We also learn about the views of Bogdanov and Lunacharsky, the first much the most original, the second the most amiable of the epigoni of Russian Marxism, both of whom had the good fortune to die in peace before the radical purges of the intellectuals in the later 'thirties. Dr Kline's idea of describing different attitudes towards some single 'permitted' philosopher, in order to illustrate the intellectual controversies and political

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controls of the early Soviet period, is original, and his realisation of it is of genuine interest to specialists.

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