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## PHILOSOPHY, THE STATE, AND PLATO-MARXISM

By Mikhail Epstein

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## PHILOSOPHY, THE STATE, AND PLATO-MARXISM

How late Soviet philosophy struggled against Marxism — and prevailed

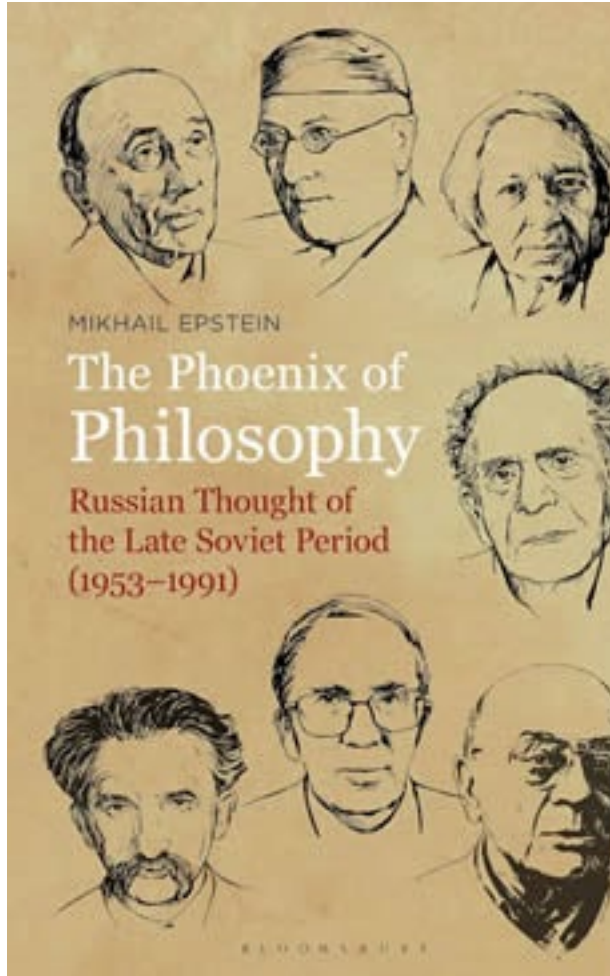
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*By Mikhail Epstein*

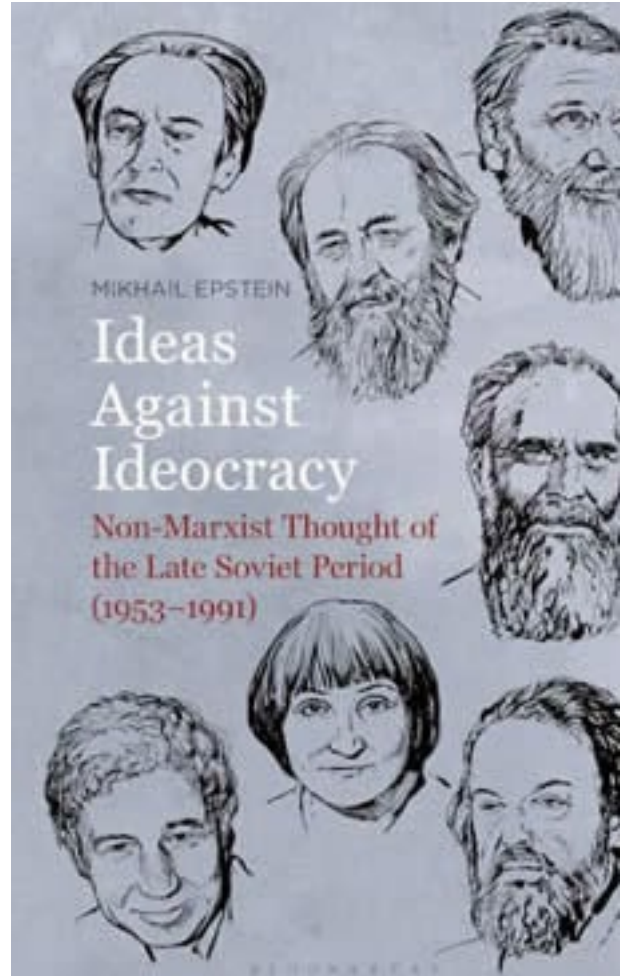
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**THE PHOENIX OF PHILOSOPHY**  
**RUSSIAN THOUGHT OF THE LATE**  
**SOVIET PERIOD (1953-1991)**  
Bloomsbury Academic (2019)



**IDEAS AGAINST IDEOCRACY: NON-**  
**MARXIST THOUGHT OF THE LATE**  
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On the Purpose of Studying Late-Soviet philosophy

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In the Soviet state, more than anywhere else in history, philosophy became a supreme political and legal institution, acquiring the power of a supra-personal, universal reason. In its unrestricted dominion, it was in fact equivalent to madness, and itself ruthlessly victimized individual thinkers. In the 20th century, Russia suffered not from a lack, but from an excess of philosophy. Nikolai Berdiaev wrote of this paradoxical combination: Russians love to philosophize, yet the fate of the philosopher in Russia is painful and tragic. This applies even to the relatively tranquil and “vegetarian” period of Soviet history that followed Stalin’s death. Nearly all the thinkers featured in these books, including those who were relatively fortunate and managed to avoid arrest and persecution, were silenced for years or decades, or forced to chop up their thoughts to fit the procrustean bed of the state’s governing “reason.”

The relationship between power and thought in the Soviet Union is well illustrated by the fact that, of the 62 thinkers to whom the respective individual chapters are devoted, twenty were subjected to arrest and imprisonment: Amalrik, D. Andreev, Bakhtin, Belinkov, Brodsky, Esenin-Volpin, Golosovker, L. Gumilev, Khazanov, Konrad, Krasnov–Levitin, Likhachev, Losev, Mikhajlov, Nalimov, Pomerants, Sakharov, Solzhenitsyn, Sinyavsky, and Voynoyasenetsky. Nineteen opted or were forced to emigrate to the West. A. Men was murdered, Ilyenkov committed suicide. This represents two thirds of the list of prominent thinkers covered.

Russian intellectual history is a history of thought fighting desperately to escape the prison of a political system created by the strenuous and sacrificial efforts of thought itself. What makes Russian thought so remarkable is its internal tension, its struggle against itself, against its own ideational constructions and political extensions. One speculative capacity, the “intelligentsia,” opposed itself to another speculative capacity, the “ideocracy”—but the former also created its own versions of the latter. This self-contradictory movement of thought, shattering its own foundations, is what lends Russian philosophy its unprecedented, at times “suicidal” character.

Overall, the philosophical thought of the late Soviet period (1950s–80s) played no less a role in the collapse of the communist system than had Marxist philosophy in its formation. The Russian intellectual scene of that period is unique in world philosophy: it is a history of thought struggling desperately to escape its own self-imprisonment—the shackles of an ideological system created by the efforts of thought itself.

What drew me to writing about this subject? In the Soviet Union, where I lived until the age of forty, the study and practices of philosophy were the most effective way of resistance to the

system, which was itself based on philosophy (Marxism, materialism, and atheism). Independent philosophy was under suspicion as a potentially subversive activity. In this period to philosophize was an act of self-liberation via an awareness of the relativity of the dominant ideological discourse. “Give me whereon to stand,” said Archimedes, “and I will move the earth.” In my youth, standing on a certain philosophical ground allowed one to distance oneself from the existing system and to challenge it, at least intellectually. Thus my generation looked for alternatives to Marxist totalitarianism in the philosophy of Western and Russian idealists, existentialists, and religious thinkers. If you are deeply dissatisfied with the prevailing order of things, you need to rely on philosophy, because it offers the most radical alternatives.

In addition to this personal and biographical reason to write about the late-Soviet thought, there was also a professional one. All existing histories of Russian and Soviet philosophy end their coverage in the mid-twentieth century, which happens to be the time of my own birth (1950). This prompted me to move further, into the latter half of the twentieth century. I grew up and developed professionally in Moscow among the people of the older generation who made the philosophy of this epoch; I read their books and attended their lectures. I felt it my duty to appraise their legacy and explain how the most durable tyranny of the twentieth century, enforced by a Marxist philosophical utopia, was shattered by different kinds of philosophy: personalism and liberalism, structuralism, neorationalism, phenomenology and cultural studies. Rarely in the history of thought have philosophy and the humanities as a whole served as so liberating a force as in Russia from the 1950s through the 1980s.

When I moved from the Soviet Union to the United States in 1990, I served for a year as a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (Washington DC), exploring the language of Soviet ideology. Then I decided to expand my research to include the full scope of late-Soviet intellectual movements. This work, under its initial title *Russian Philosophical and Humanistic Thought since 1950*, was produced in 1991–94. At that time, I left this project unfinished, as I was carried away by other interests, publishing at the turn of the century such books as *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism & Contemporary Russian Culture* (1995), *Transcultural Experiments* (1999) *Postmodernism in Russia* (2000) and *A Philosophy of the Possible* (2001).

It took me another twenty years to reappraise the intellectual vigor and far-reaching repercussions of late-Soviet Marxist and non-Marxist thought and to complete these books now, at the time when Marxism is gaining new adherents.

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Platonic and Ideocratic Traditions of Russian Thought

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The academic community in the West tends to be suspicious of the very phenomenon of Russian philosophy, at best categorizing it as “ideology” or “social thought.” But what is philosophy? There is no simple and universal definition, and many thinkers consider it impossible to formulate one. The most credible attempt seems to be a nominalistic reference: philosophy is that which Plato and Aristotle, Kant and Hegel engaged in. Perhaps the best-known and most widely cited—if slightly eccentric—definition belongs to A. N. Whitehead: “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of series of footnotes to Plato. I do not mean the systematic scheme of thought which scholars have doubtfully extracted from his writings. I allude to the wealth of general ideas scattered through them.... European philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato.”<sup>1</sup>

If so, Russian thought must be viewed as an important part of the Western philosophical heritage, since it provides perhaps the most elaborate set of footnotes to Plato’s most mature and comprehensive dialogues: the *Republic* and the *Laws*. Questions of social ethics and political philosophy, of the individual’s relationship to the state, of adequate knowledge and virtuous behavior, of wisdom and power, of religious and aesthetic values, of ideas and ideals as guidelines for human life—all of these are central to Russian philosophy and exemplify its continuing relevance to the Western tradition. Moreover, the very status of ideas in Russian philosophy mirrors Plato’s vision of them as ontological entities, “laws,” or ideal principles—as distinct from mere epistemological units, or tools of cognition. The Platonic tendency to integrate philosophical and religious teachings, and to implement them politically, culminated in twentieth-century Russia. In discussing Russian philosophy, especially of the Soviet period, we must inevitably consider the practical reality of “integrative” Platonic conceptions within the final outcome of the Soviet ideocratic utopia, in which philosophy was called upon to rule the republic as the supreme religious and political authority.

Accordingly, Russian philosophy deserves an honored place in Western intellectual history. Nowhere have Plato's teachings on the relationship of ideas to the foundation of the state been incarnated so vigorously and on such a grandiose scale as in communist Russia. To *philosophize reality*, to transform it into a transparent kingdom of ideas, was considered the goal of thinking. This is why thought itself, in the very moment of its triumph, became a prisoner in the Crystal Palace that Soviet ideocracy erected on a philosophical foundation. In the Soviet state, more than anywhere else in history, philosophy became a supreme legal and political institution, acquiring the power of a supra-personal, universal reason, which in its unrestricted dominion was equivalent to madness—since, being a state philosophy, it ruthlessly victimized individual thinkers. In other countries, the supreme value and highest level of authority is assigned to religious beliefs, or to economic profit, but in communist Russia, it was philosophy that served as the ultimate criterion of truth and the foundation of all political and economic transformations. Loyalty to the teachings of dialectical and historical materialism was the prerequisite of civic loyalty and professional success.

If we attempt to single out a central tenet of Russian philosophy comparable to that of rationalism in French philosophy, or empiricism in English philosophy, this would be “holism” or “totalism.” Such diverse Russian thinkers as Petr Chaadaev and Vissarion Belinsky, Ivan Kireevsky and Aleksandr Herzen, Vladimir Solovyov and Vasilii Rozanov, all put forward the category of “integrity,” “wholeness,” “totality” (*tseĭnostʹ*, *tseĭlostnostʹ*) or “all-unity” (*vseedinstvo*), which presupposes, first and foremost, the unity of knowledge and existence, of reason and faith, of intellectual and social life. Grigorii Skovoroda (1722–94), often called “the first original Russian-Ukrainian thinker,” expressed the following credo in his prayer to God on sending a new Socrates to Russia: “I believe that knowledge should not be limited to the high-priests of science and scholarship, who stuff themselves to overflowing with it, but should enter into the life of the whole people.”<sup>2</sup>

Ivan Kireevsky (1806–56), a founder of Russian Slavophilism, sought to inaugurate “an independent philosophy corresponding to the basic principles of ancient Russian culture and capable of subjecting the divided culture of the West to the integrated consciousness of believing reason.”<sup>3</sup> Characteristically, Kireevsky derived this tendency of Russian philosophy from Plato, as opposed to “the mind of Western man [which] seems to have a special kinship with Aristotle,”<sup>4</sup> that is, with one-sided abstract rationalism. Invoking the legacy of Eastern Christian thought, Kireevsky asserts that

in Greek thinkers we do not observe a special predilection for Aristotle, but, to the contrary, the majority of them overtly prefer Plato ... probably because Plato's very mode of thinking presents more integrity [*tseł'nost'*] in the exercises of the mind, more warmth and harmony in the speculative activity of reason. This is why virtually the same relationship that we observe between these two philosophers of antiquity [Aristotle and Plato] existed between the philosophy of the Latin world as elaborated in scholasticism and the spiritual philosophy that we find in the writers of the Eastern Church, the philosophy that was especially clearly expressed by the Holy Fathers who lived after the defection of [Catholic] Rome.<sup>5</sup>

This inclination to relate Russian thought to Plato as opposed to Aristotle became a hallmark of the Russian intellectual tradition, which assumed that "in Plato's teaching, religion and philosophy are in the closest contact, but already in Aristotle's system, philosophy makes a decisive break with religion."<sup>6</sup>

These two thinkers stand at the source of Western civilization: Plato, with his dualistic split between the material and the ideal realms, and Aristotle, who sought to mediate between these extremes by arguing that ideas were present in objects themselves, as their inherent forms. According to Sergei Averintsev, an outstanding Russian cultural scholar and specialist in antiquity:

Russian culture encountered Plato more than once. In ancient Russia, this encounter took place through the mediation of the Platonic Fathers of the Church. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the mediators were Schelling and the Russians Schellingians, including the great Tjutchev, then Vladimir Solovyov, Vladimir Ern, Father Pavel Florensky, and Viacheslav Ivanov. Ancient philosophy was studied by opponents of positivism and materialism, who were more or less romantically inclined, and who naturally took up Plato's poetic dialogues rather than Aristotle's boring treatises. And the encounter with Aristotle never took place.... Educated society in Russia has, so far, not read Aristotle.<sup>7</sup>

From Averintsev's point of view, it is only to be regretted that Russian civilization chose the Platonic model, developing it with a relentless consistency that led directly to the realization of Plato's ideal government, where the order of things was strictly subservient to the order of ideas. From this perspective, Soviet philosophy embodied the final stage of the development of Plato's ideas. In this stage, the project of ideocracy was both practically realized and theoretically exhausted. In a certain sense, Russian philosophy of the past two centuries

summarizes and explicates more than two millennia of the Platonic tradition, and points a way for a return to foundations that are separate from the idealistic and ideological spheres.

From the 1920s through the 1940s, the kingdom of communist ideas succeeded in equating itself with social reality. However, beginning in the mid-1950s, stimulated by Nikita Khrushchev's denunciations of Stalin in 1956, this "ideal republic" increasingly revealed itself to be illusory and disconnected from reality. Religious and personalist philosophy, culturology, structuralism, scientism and the philosophy of thought-action, phenomenology, liberalism, and nationalism—all of these intellectual movements and methods were attempts to de-ideologize the social sphere (or to re-ideologize it on new foundations). Thought tried to free itself from subjection to ideocracy by putting down roots in authentic, concrete forms of being, such as the empirical credibility of science, the existential uniqueness of personality, faith in a living God, the spiritual integrity of humankind, the rational design of the cosmos, the symbolic meanings of culture, or the organic soul of the nation; or by challenging the master discourse of Soviet ideology through parodic imitation.

In its transition to its post-Soviet stage, Russian philosophy ultimately came to a sort of postmodernist skepticism and pluralism, a conceptualist style of thought that ironically reproduces and exaggerates the world of abstract ideas in order to demonstrate their artificial and chimerical nature. All that remained of the principle of ideocracy by the early 1990s was a museum of obsolete ideas, a carnival side-show of ideological curiosities.

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### Platonism–Marxism and the End of Ideocracy

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What role did Marxism play in the Platonic drama of Russian philosophy? Marxism, which deduces all ideas from the economic base of society, would seem to be diametrically opposed to Platonism. But Marxism, it should be recalled, represents a reversal of Hegelian idealism, the final moment in the self-development of the Absolute Idea. What is principally new in Hegel, as compared with Plato, is the progressive historical development of the Idea; but the end of this process is postulated as the universal state (presumably conceived on the model of the Prussian monarchy), which embraces the totality of the self-cognizant mind. Both Platonic and Hegelian idealism culminate in the concept of the ideal state. Although Marx removed this



ideal from the causality of the historical process, it remains in his system as a teleological motive and grows into a vision of a future communist society.<sup>8</sup>

Plato, Hegel, and Marx represent three stages in the development of idealism in its progressive symbiosis with social engineering: (1) the supernatural world of ideas; (2) the manifestation of the Absolute Idea in history; and (3) the transformation of history by the force of ideas. For Plato, ideas are abstracted to a transcendental realm. For Hegel, the Idea is already ingrained as the alpha and omega of the historical process: it generates, and at the same time consummates, history in the course of its progressive self-awareness. Marx abolishes the idea as the alpha of history in order to emphasize the omega-point: the prospect of the historical culmination of unified humanity in the transparent kingdom of ideas, the self-government of collective reason.

Moreover, Marxism potentially proves more staunchly idealistic than even Platonism. According to Plato, the world of ideas exists in and of itself, without necessarily demanding historical embodiment. For Marx, ideas are inseparable from the material process, and seek realization and implementation. In Marx's own words, "theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses."<sup>9</sup> The message of "militant materialism," as realized in Russia by this term's coiner Lenin and his disciples, was that the power of "progressive" ideas should not be *abstracted from* but rather *attracted to* material life, even subordinating and transforming the economic base: hence, the institution of five-year plans that subordinated the entire development of the country to idealistic projections. Whereas ideas in Plato and Hegel still soared above the earth, constituting a separate sphere of Supreme Mind or Absolute Spirit, in Soviet Marxism they were grounded in the foundation of material life, from heavy industry to everyday reality, and from the rituals of party purges to ceremonial tidying-ups of neighborhoods. In this view, the ruling ideology would not forgive the slightest flaw or deviation from the purity of ideas: ideas had descended into the substance of Being, and they therefore demanded the complete submission of every person at every moment of their life. Soviet materialism proved to be an instrument of militant idealism, craving ever newer sacrifices for the altar of sacred ideas. This occurred in strict correspondence with another of Marx's statements: "As the revolution then began in the brain of the *monk*, so now it begins in the brain of the *philosopher*." But only *begins*, "for revolutions require a *passive* element, a material basis."<sup>10</sup>

For all these reasons, the dominant intellectual movement of the Soviet epoch was not just Marxism, but more specifically *Plato-Marxism*—an idealism that asserts itself as the regulative principle of material life. If Plato, from the idealist assumptions of his philosophy, deduced the

system of the communist state, then Marx, proceeding from communist assumptions, deduced a system of ideocracy, a dictatorial state that was realized through the efforts of his most consistent and determined Soviet followers. Materialism became an ideology, and the very phrase “materialist ideology” came to sound perfectly natural to Soviet ears. No less natural, therefore, is the term “Plato-Marxism.” *Platonism* is the underside of *Marxism*, and the eventual collapse of the Soviet ideocratic state can be viewed as a landmark in the historical fate of both philosophical positions.

The relatively brief Soviet period of just over seventy years sums up the two millennia of Western thought that followed Plato’s quest for the world of ruling ideas. Among these footnotes to Plato that Whitehead believed to be “the general characterization of the European philosophical tradition,” Soviet philosophy appears to the attentive eye as the final entry, signifying “The End.”

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#### A. Kojève—L. Strauss Debate

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One cannot but recall in this context a debate between two outstanding thinkers of the mid-twentieth century, Alexandre Kojève (1908–68), a French philosopher of Russian origin (his original surname was Kozhevnikov), and Leo Strauss (1899–1973), an American political scientist and historian of philosophy, of German-Jewish origin.<sup>11</sup> In their debate on “tyranny and wisdom,” they came to opposite conclusions. Kojève, who was strongly influenced by Hegel and Heidegger, assumed that “politics is derivative from *philosophy*,”<sup>12</sup> and, conversely, that philosophy needs politics in order to realize its ideas (even at the price of their temporary distortion)—and thus to accomplish its ultimate goal: the construction of the universal and socially homogeneous state. At this point, according to Kojève, both history and philosophy achieve their end and negate themselves by merging into one. History dissolves in the Absolute Idea, which comes to complete self-realization in the universal state, whereas philosophy, being itself only a preparatory stage, a “love of wisdom,” enables the full manifestation of wisdom, “Sophia,” in political institutions. Leo Strauss biting responds that, indeed, “the coming of the universal and homogeneous state will be the end of philosophy on earth.”<sup>13</sup> Yet the effect of such a process will be far less sublime than what Kojève envisioned; the result will be, rather, the political persecution and physical extermination of philosophers.

Although the Soviet historical experiment is rarely mentioned in this debate, it is implicit throughout. No wonder, since Kojève, a Russian émigré, emerged from the ideological movement known as Eurasianism, which, as early as the 1920s, expressed qualified support for the Soviet regime as an embodiment of the Hegelian impulse to the Absolute State. Eurasianists designated this “highest” type of state as “ideocratic,” that is, ruled by and ruling through the power of ideas. This was one of the first, and most euphoric and euphemistic, formulations of what later came to be known as “totalitarianism.”

As the ideocratic state demonstrated clearly in the USSR, the attempt to construct society according to the precepts of philosophy brings about their mutual destruction rather than fulfillment. A society subjected to the rule of ideas gradually disintegrates economically and morally, whereas philosophy subjected to the rule of politicians degenerates into catechism and propaganda, and also disintegrates physically as its practitioners are persecuted and exterminated. This result is quite predictable, since the state conceived as the embodiment of Philosophy cannot tolerate any philosophy other than its own.

Philosophy itself, however, survives both its martyrs and its persecutors. Today, from the perspective of post-Hegelian and post-Marxist historicism, we are in the privileged position of being able to see what happens after the collapse of the ideocratic state, that perfect synthesis of “tyranny and wisdom.” Although Strauss was essentially correct in his assessment of the perils of such a union, one cannot deny a kind of surplus value in such an experiment. Ironically, Kojève was not far in error in his prediction that “the coming of the wise man must necessarily be preceded by the revolutionary political action of the tyrant (who will realize the universal State).”<sup>14</sup> By this he meant that “Sophia,” or “absolute reason,” would be manifested after all *philo-sophical* aspirations toward wisdom have been realized by the revolutionary action of a tyrant. But what happens, in fact, is that wisdom accumulated by history denies the value of revolution itself, of all the philosophical illusions and temptations that led to the establishment of the universal state.

In the aftermath of the totalitarian regime, the mutual negation of “philosophy and society” in their attempted synthesis turns into the negation of synthesis itself, both on the part of politicians who cut back their ideological claims, and on the part of thinkers who withdraw their political aspirations. This sort of wisdom, born of historical experience, draws a clear line of demarcation between politics and philosophy while challenging the effectiveness of the “wisdom-tyranny” union, and becomes possible only in the aftermath of a futile though continuous and comprehensive ideocratic experiment. What gives a unique and universal

significance to the “deferred” wisdom of Russian thought in the late and post-Soviet periods is its ability to pronounce a competent judgment on Platonic and Hegelian conceptions of the ideal state from within the “attained” reality of this very state. 🇷🇺

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### Notes:

1 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1979), 39.

2 Gregory Skovoroda, “Socrates in Russia,” in *Russian Philosophy*, ed. James M. Edie, James P. Scanlan, and Mary-Barbara Zeldin (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 1: 17–18.

3 Ivan Kireevsky, “On the Necessity and Possibility of New Principles in Philosophy,” *ibid.*, 213.

4 *Ibid.*, 182.

5 I. V. Kireevskii, *Kritika i estetika* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1979), 272.

6 A. I. Abramov, “Otsenka filosofii Platona v russkoi idealisticheskoi filosofii,” in *Platon i ego epokha*, ed. F. Kh. Kessidi (Moscow: Nauka, 1979), 222.

7 Sergei Averintsev, *Ritorika i istoki evropeiskoi literaturnoi traditsii* (Moscow: Shkola “Iazyki russkoi kul’tury,” 1996), 328. Averintsev directly counterposes the two philosophers thus: “If Plato is the first utopian thinker, then Aristotle is the first thinker to look the utopian spirit straight in the eye and overcome it” (ibid., 320).

8 On the totalitarian implications of Platonism and its connection with Marxist philosophy, see Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966). Comparisons of Marx and Plato are scattered throughout the book and can be traced using the subject index. In particular, Popper remarks: “The whole idea—which was not Marx’s invention—that there is something behind the prices, an objective or real or true value of which prices are only a ‘form of appearance,’ shows clearly enough the influence of Platonic Idealism with its distinction between a hidden essential or true reality, and an accidental or delusive appearance” (2: 165).

9 Karl Marx, “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. Introduction.” Translated by Annette Jolin and Joseph O’Malley. Available electronically: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>

10 Ibid.

11 I owe a deep gratitude to Dr. Eve Adler (1945–2004) of Middlebury College, who drew my attention to this dialogue.

12 Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny. Including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence*, ed. Victor Gourevich and Michael S. Roth (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 173.

13 Ibid., 211.

14 Ibid., 175.

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