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Alexandre Kojève and Russian philosophy

Guest editors' introduction

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The Russo-French philosopher and statesman Alexandre Kojève (1902–1968) is an influential figure in twentieth-century intellectual history. His thought is widely regarded as a catalyst for post-structuralism, phenomenology, existentialism and psychoanalysis. It was in Kojève's seminars on Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, held throughout the 1930s at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* in Paris, where figures such as Jacques Lacan, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Georges Bataille received their philosophical education. One result of Kojève's formative Hegelianism, however, was an ossification and simplification of his rich and diverse philosophical interests. In particular, his notion of the end of history, later appropriated by Francis Fukuyama, as well as his innovative reading of the master–slave dialectic would in time become so ubiquitous that they overshadowed all other aspects of his oeuvre. Recent archival and scholarly work on Kojève has rectified this omission, revealing a multifaceted, eclectic thinker who himself drew from a variety of intellectual sources. This special issue contributes to the current 'Kojève Renaissance' by examining one crucial source that has been largely neglected: Russian philosophy and intellectual history.

It is no secret that Alexandre Kojève was a philosopher of Russian descent. Born Aleksandr Kozhevnikov into a well-to-do Muscovite family in 1902, Kojève emigrated to the West in 1920: first to Germany, where he studied at the Universities of Heidelberg and Berlin, and then, in 1926, to the French capital, which remained Kojève's home until his death in 1968. Both in Germany and France, while quickly assimilating into their respective intellectual cultures, Kojève continued to write in Russian. Texts in Russian by Kojève include his early philosophical diary, book reviews and editorial essays, published in (often Eurasianist) émigré press, as well as several major philosophical texts that have only been made available posthumously.

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As handwritten annotations in Kojève's manuscripts reveal, some of the earliest reviews were published under the name of Alexandre Koyré. *Atheism* [*Ateizm*], written in 1931 and first published in a French translation (Kojève 1998), reveals an enduring fascination with theology and atheism. The manuscript has recently been translated into English by Jeff Love (Kojève 2018).

In January 1931, while deeply immersed in quantum physics and mathematics, Kojève gave a talk at the *Société russe de philosophie des sciences*. In a critical response to Ervand Kogbetliants's lecture "The Idea of Infinity and Types of Culture," Kojève spoke on infinity and the continuum. The attendance list for Kojève's lecture in the archives includes notable Russian philosophers of religion in exile, including the Orthodox theologian Georgy Florovsky (Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF)). At that time, Kojève was writing a book in Russian on determinism, which would be later translated into French and published posthumously. Another Russian-language text, still forthcoming, is often referred to as the 'Sophia manuscript,' an abbreviation of its full title *Sofia, Philo-Sofia, and Phenomenology* [*Sofiia, Filo-sofiia i fenomenologiia*]. Written in 1940–1941, the manuscript consists of over 900 pages devoted to the question of philosophical wisdom. Tellingly, Kojève locates philosophical wisdom incarnate in the Stalinist state, and the Sophia manuscript most clearly ties Kojève's thought to the Soviet Union, as the sociopolitical embodiment of a philosophical idea.

The question of a connection between Kojève and Russian thought first emerged in scholarship on the philosopher as early as the late 1990s. Scholars such as Boris Groys (2002), Annett Jubara (2005), Vadim Rossman (1998, 1999), Aleksei Rutkevich (1997) and Galin Tihanov (2002) encouraged a renewed look at Kojève's writings. They were the first to emphasize the role that Russian ideas played in the formation of his philosophy. Since then, subsequently published material written by Kojève, combined with a renewed interest in his work in general, has furthered such scholarly debates (Groys 2012, 2016; Jacobs 2022; Love 2018a, 2018b; Tokarev 2017, 2018; Wilson 2019, 2022). These interventions have inspired a more systematic discussion of Alexandre Kojève and Russian philosophy in this special issue.

On the one hand, Kojève's Russian origins serve as but one footnote in the history of cosmopolitan, interwar Paris, which was a period of modernist experimentation across cultural forms, driven in large part through intellectual migrations and transnational exchanges. On the other, Kojève's links were just as much biographical—through Russian relatives abroad, including his uncle, the famous abstract painter Wassily Kandinsky, as well as close friendships with fashion photographer Eugène Rubin and philosophers Lev Karsavin and Alexandre Koyré.[1] Writing about the 'exotic' allure of Kojève's seminars, in his memoirs Raymond Aron (2010) attributes some of their success to the charm of Kojève's thick Slavic accent, which added a "certain originality" to his delivery of Hegelianism. Kojève's seamless inhabitation of the cosmopolitan dandy might be one reason for his unchallenged position in the canon of 'French Theory'. However, though Kojève assimilated rather quickly into

[1] Kandinsky and Kojève maintained a lengthy correspondence concerning their respective understandings of nonfigurative painting. Boris Groys has recently edited an English-language translation of this correspondence, as well as a subsequent essay written by Kojève (see Kojève 2023). Using his Russian name Evgenii Reis (2000), Rubin published his own recollections of a friendship with Kojève.

Parisian intellectual life, he remained culturally linked to the rich networks of Russian Paris. This aspect, too, deserves its place in this history.

If Kojève made no effort to hide his Russian origins, their impact on his philosophical commitments, however, have by contrast remained a source of lingering ambiguity, and even controversy. During the Cold War period, just after World War II, Kojève moved from academic philosophy into politics, serving as an advisor to the French government. In these decades, 'Russian' became largely synonymous with 'Soviet.' Throughout his political career, the philosopher and bureaucrat was often accused of endorsing Stalinism and even cultivating relationships with Soviet intelligence agents—allegations that have since been largely proven true, based on archival materials discovered in both Kojève's own collected papers and state documents released to the public since the collapse of the Iron Curtain. One such document, an editorial-style essay written by Kojève in support of Soviet censorship in the 1940s, is published in this special issue for the first time.

These attested moments of sympathy for the Soviet Union are further complicated by Kojève's engagement with the problematic legacies of Russian religious philosophy, because they had been preserved and cultivated within the diaspora. Kojève wrote his earliest works on the philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov, including his doctoral thesis in Heidelberg, supervised by Karl Jaspers; his sharp critique of the philosopher would remain present throughout his work. At one point, Kojève would even transform Solovyov's theory of Divine Wisdom, or *Sofia*, into an apology for philosophical Stalinism. These two facets of Kojève's 'Russian' philosophy have produced ambivalence in the political interpretations of his thought: If Kojève's avowed Stalinism rightfully provoked some to claim him an advocate for the Soviet Union, others, such as Aron, saw the philosopher as 'in spite of everything a White Russian, possibly communist on the grounds of universal history, but very removed from the Party.' In the words of Nina Ivanoff, his longtime partner, Kojève 'was neither a patriot of France nor of anywhere else. He was a patriot of nothing, a partisan of the universal State, Russia interested him because he thought that Russia, having become the Soviet Union, could play this role' (Aron 2010, pp. 208).

That Kojève might work within a Russian (or Soviet) philosophical tradition provokes a sense of taxonomical confusion for scholars of émigré philosophy. Indeed, unlike his fellow émigrés Nikolai Berdyaev and Lev Shestov, Kojève's name is deeply inscribed in the history of French or continental philosophy—whereas Berdyaev and Shestov are considered Russian thinkers. Why are Berdyaev, who was born in Obukhovo (today Obukhiv in Kyiv Oblast), and Shestov, born Lev Isaakovich Schwarzmann into a Jewish family in Kyiv, considered Russian philosophers—while the Muscovite Kozhevnikov went first French, then global? Does 'Russian' serve here a synonym of Russophone, a national category, or a reference to the historical territory of the former Russian empire? These questions, fundamental to the study of diaspora culture more broadly, first instigated our special issue on Kojève and Russian philosophy.

We recognize that the invocation of national boundaries of an (émigré) philosopher risks essentializing, and thus reinforcing, divisions between cultural traditions. Besides these geographical and linguistic difficulties, the ideological conundrums of Russian philosophy are even more severe. Must Russian philosophy always be embedded within a national intellectual project, or might its ideas and themes move more

fluidly—at times even detached from the political views of its practitioners? Furthermore, how might the legacies of Russian and Soviet imperialism shape and restrict definitions of a Russian canon, both within and outside Russia? Particularly among exilic figures, eager both to preserve their intellectual heritage and introduce it to new audiences, processes of (self-)orientalization abound in defining Russian philosophy. To provide one example, the Eurasianist circles of the Russian diaspora, several of which Kojève himself frequented, were often eager to embrace a reified sense of Russian identity, just as much within philosophy as in other cultural practices.

As a result of the complex vagaries of Russian intellectual history, scholars of Russian philosophy face a complex array of simultaneous responsibilities. This special issue on Kojève ought to be read just as much as an effort to further knowledge of such thinkers as Karsavin, Koyré, Berdyaev and Dmytro Chyzhevsky (another Kyiv-born émigré) who are absent from or marginalized within the canon of Western philosophy—yet essential to this canon's very formation in the interwar period. We believe that to critically evaluate, decolonize and retell the history of philosophy is an urgent task for scholars today. To employ one of Kojève's favorite terms: To offer an 'attempt at an update' [*essai d'une mise à jour*] means to reintegrate these 'Russian' philosophers into a transnational, globalized map of ideas.

The crucial role played by emigration and exile within Russian intellectual history exacerbates these problems and their centrality, in both disciplinary scope and methodology. To rethink the political and ideological ramifications of Russian philosophy, we ought to examine its blind spots: hidden interlocutors, outsiders, refugees and renegades. In this regard, the articles collected in "Alexandre Kojève and Russian Philosophy" provide more than just an interesting case study—they highlight Kojève's unique 'in-between' position within the Russian tradition, allowing us to better understand the globalized nature of philosophy in the twentieth century, and the place of Russian philosophy in it.

This special issue thus examines the inevitable complications when defining any notion of Russianness, and its relationship to the philosopher's own complex legacies. We examine Kojève as a thinker who, in writing on and engaging with the Russian tradition, simultaneously critiques, subverts and even reorients it. We also explore the various identities that Kojève inhabited: émigré, mediator, critic, tourist, partisan and bureaucrat. By retracing several competing cultural and political influences in his work, the articles and primary documents in this issue offer diverse perspectives on his relationship to fin-de-siècle Russia, the Soviet Union and Russian thought, both back home and abroad. The 'and' between 'Kojève' and 'Russian' does not correspond to a strictly comparative framework; rather, it points to an eclectic, open and ambiguous space for various encounters between Kojève and Russian philosophy.

Hence, our special issue hypothetically reintroduces Kojève as a Russian thinker—only to deconstruct this very category, revealing some of the problems that underlie the premise of what it means to be a 'Russian thinker.' Kojève's relationship to Russian thought is explored from various points of convergence: Hegelianism, as interpreted by Kojève and other Russian philosophers; Kojève's writings on Vladimir Solovyov, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Russian religious thought; the philosopher's engagement with Stalinism and the Russian revolution; his contacts to the Russian diaspora; comparative readings of Kojève and other Russian thinkers; and aesthetic concerns, including Kojève's photography.

In her article, Annett Jubara analyzes Kojève's paradoxical relationship to Russian religious philosophy. The author argues that his dialogue with the Russian tradition is shaped by the contrast between a hidden influence of religious thought and his own proclaimed atheism. Kojève's engagement with Russian philosophy is elucidated in two case studies. The first one is concerned with Kojève's reshaping of Vladimir Solovyov's principle of evil. The second explores the philosopher's appropriation of Dostoevsky's Godmanhood.

Alexey Rutkevich's article is invested in a political reading of Kojève's philosophy. Rutkevich, however, approaches the question of Kojève and the Soviet Union through his interest in revolution as a philosophical concept. In particular, Rutkevich examines Kojève in his convergence with left Nietzscheanism, as it had been developed within Russian revolutionary traditions. Rutkevich's article thus situates Kojève, and his vision of both revolution and the notion of political terrorism, within a much longer and broader discussion of these ideas in fin-de-siècle Russia.

In her own article, Isabel Jacobs situates Kojève's unique philosophical intervention within the Russian tradition. Jacobs focuses on the relationship between Kojève and Russian Hegelianism, retracing the history of the philosopher's reflections on method and time, from early Soviet discourses to French postmodernism. She argues that Kojève, following his predecessor Alexandre Koyré, imported Russian Hegelianism and phenomenology into French thought. In particular, Jacobs demonstrates how Kojève's Hegelianism was significantly shaped by his encounter with Ivan Ilyin's 1918 commentary on Hegel, while also considering writings by Dmytro Chyzhevsky and Gustav Shpet.

Due to the success of his seminars on *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Kojève is most frequently read as an interpreter of Hegel. In his article, however, Jeff Love analyzes an unexamined, yet essential, aspect of Kojève's philosophical interests, namely, Kant. Kojève had in fact written a manuscript on Kant in the 1950s, a work which was discovered after his death and only published posthumously. Love examines both this manuscript, and other invocations of Kant in texts by Kojève, in the light of Kojève's interest in Stalinism as a philosophical project. Terms frequently associated with Kojève's Hegelianism—history, freedom and the state—are thus reworked within a Kantian framework and regarding its relevance to the Stalinist state.

In his article on Kojève's photography, Dmitry Tokarev critically discusses Boris Groys's 2012 exhibition *After History: Alexandre Kojève as a Photographer* and its reception. Tokarev questions and revises Groys's curatorial framework that emphasized the 'post-historical' dimension in Kojève's photos, evoking an empty, dehumanized world. Considering the aesthetic and ontological impact of Kojève's brief account of his 1920 visit to Rome and his 1936 article on Kandinsky, Tokarev proposes a novel reading of Kojève's photographic stance. The notion of aura, as proposed by Walter Benjamin, becomes operative in a comparative treatment of Kojève's and Eugène Atget's photography.

Lastly, in addition to two reviews of recent monographs on Kojève that cover his Russian roots, two new English translations of texts by Kojève complement this special issue. The first is a previously unpublished essay that Kojève had written in response to a text by Nikolai Berdyaev. In an editorial published in the émigré journal *Russian News* [*Russkie novosti*], Berdyaev had criticized the intensification of Soviet

censorship under Zhdanov in the 1940s, specifically its effect upon the livelihoods of Anna Akhmatova and Mikhail Zoshchenko. In Kojève's own essay, discovered in his collected papers and translated by Rambert Nicolas, the philosopher criticizes what he views as Berdyaev's simplistic reading of unbridled creativity and its role within Soviet politics. He instead offers an apology for Soviet censorship, considering it as a pragmatic necessity within Stalinist cultural politics.

By contrast, the second text by Kojève, translated by Trevor Wilson, reveals the philosopher's more jaded reflections on the Soviet Union, written after his journey to the Soviet Union in August 1957. Internally circulating within the French Ministry of Economy and Finance where Kojève worked, the note arguably exerted a significant influence on French foreign policy during the Cold War. It is as much a portrait of the political climate during Khrushchev's Thaw as it is a Schmittian analysis of colonial politics and economic development in the postwar decades—in this light, the note complements a well-known series of exchanges between Kojève and Carl Schmitt (2001), held in 1955 just prior to his trip to Moscow. While Kojève's response to Berdyaev might suggest a sympathy for the Soviet regime, the tone in the note has shifted: Here, Kojève appears as a sharp critic of Soviet Marxism.

As a result of these many philosophical, historical and cultural linkages, this special issue does not merely confine itself to a study of Kojève within the bounds of a Russian tradition. Instead, we offer readers a view of Kojève in the context of Russian thought that might further strengthen our understanding of the diverse intellectual heritages ever-present in his philosophical system. The Russian tradition, among other rich sources of inspiration, uniquely shaped Kojève's life and thought across national and political borders.

Declarations

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