



Introduction to Alexandre Kojève’s “Moscow, August 1957”

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Alexandre Kojève’s well-known criticism of the Soviet Union appears in the “Note to the Second Edition” of the Hegel lectures that also introduced his idea of an End of History. Written in 1959, after a “recent voyage to Japan,” Kojève’s two footnotes explore a “post-historical” state of civilization. In the first note, Kojève had proclaimed “the definitive annihilation of Man properly so-called.” After history, the human being has returned to animality. The second note is less dramatic but just as bizarre. Traveling to the East, the philosopher encountered “Japanese snobbery”: the Noh Theater, tea ceremonies, ritual suicide or *Ikebana*, the art of flower arrangement. Kojève’s experience of Japan radically shifted his view on the End of History: how would animals be able to enjoy the “Oriental” subtlety of a perfectly assembled flower bouquet?

Since no animal is a snob, the “Japanized” post-historical world must be human. In fact, Kojève claims that the West is already fully “Japanized” (he includes Russia here). While the Japanese snob indulges in empty rituals, the European *voyou*—Raymond Queneau’s postmodern take on the flaneur—strolls through ruins emptied from their cultural content. Man no longer transforms the world. Two World Wars, Kojève argues, “had only the effect of bringing the backward civilizations of the peripheral provinces into line” with the developed world. In this globalized eternal present, there is nothing new under the sun. Rather than a “permanent revolution,” the Soviet project returned to its pre-revolutionary past. The “sovietization” of Russia, Kojève provocatively contends, is no different from “the democratization of imperial Germany (by way of Hitlerism)” or “Robespierrian Bonapartism.” In short, the Soviet Union is nothing but a case study of totalitarian decay.

The United States, on the other hand, already reached the final stage of communism. The members of this “classless society” work no “more than their heart dictates.” Observing the “American way of life” on several trips between 1948 and 1958, Kojève concludes that “if the Americans give the appearance of rich Sino-Soviets, it is because the Russians and the Chinese were only Americans who are still poor but are rapidly proceeding to get richer.” During the same period, Kojève made “several voyages of comparison” to the Soviet Union. There, he gained first-hand knowledge of Soviet Russia’s “poor Americans” (Kojève 1969, pp. 159–162).

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Alexandre Kojève, Soviet Union, 1950s. Courtesy Bibliothèque nationale de France.
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It was a trip to Moscow in August 1957 that particularly impressed Kojève. Here, his view on the Soviet Union crystallized. On the 27th of September, upon return from his voyage, Kojève wrote the secret note, “Moscow, August 1957” (Kojève 1993). Not meant for publication, the text internally circulated within the French Ministry of Economy and Finance, where Kojève worked until his death in 1968 (on Kojève’s political career, see Filoni 2021, pp. 230–261). The mid-1950s saw a new era of the Cold War: the Korean War had ended in 1953, the same year as Stalin’s death, which was followed by a period of “de-Stalinization” in the Soviet Union, otherwise known as Khrushchev’s *Thaw*. In the Eastern Bloc, civil unrest culminated in the Hungarian revolution and its violent Soviet crackdown in November 1956. In the West, the European Economic Community (EEC) was created in 1957 with the Treaty of Rome.

As an influential French civil servant, Kojève was actively involved in the negotiations of the EEC, which provided the first pillars of today’s European Union. Did history *really* end? In fact, throughout the tumultuous 1950s, Kojève saw history unfolding before his eyes. Kojève read “Moscow, August 1957” to some colleagues in the French Ministry, among them the economist Bernard Clappier, another negotiator

of the EEC, and Olivier Wormser, who was the French Ambassador in Moscow at the time. The fact that both occupied key positions in the administration of the Fourth Republic suggests that Kojève’s note had a lasting impact on French foreign policy in the late 1950s. As such, it is an important document of French-Soviet relations in times of global political instability. The note was written shortly before the Algerian crisis of 1958, which led to the collapse of the Fourth Republic and the return of Charles de Gaulle as head of the Fifth Republic.

Already in his 1945 note, “Outline of a Doctrine of French Policy,” Kojève emphasized the pivotal role of France as a mediator between the “Germano-Anglo-Saxon Empire” and the “Slavo-Soviet Empire” (Kojève 1945). Promoting the idea of a “Latin Empire,” ruled by France, Kojève himself occupied a similar intermediary position as a Russian exile working in the highest ranks of the French government. Visiting the Soviet Union in the midst of the Khrushchev era, Kojève had the unique chance to reconnect with relatives and friends. Furthermore, in his diplomatic capacity, Kojève gained invaluable insights into Soviet politics and everyday life during the Thaw. His trip took place in the middle of a severe political crisis, which he closely observed and analyzed.

In February 1956, Nikita Khrushchev had presented his “Secret Speech” at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party. The result was unprecedented social liberalization, with thousands of victims of Stalinist repression rehabilitated and political prisoners freed. Subsequent anti-communist uprisings in Central Europe, most notably the Hungarian Revolution, were fiercely repressed by the Soviet leader. Opposition to Khrushchev began to increasingly form within the Party. In late June 1957, Khrushchev won a vote that enabled him to eliminate the so-called “Anti-Party Group,” which included his opponents Georgy Malenkov, Vyacheslav Molotov, and Lazar Kaganovich. All three were subsequently expelled from the Secretariat and ultimately from the Communist Party. Having reaffirmed his position as First Secretary, in October 1957, Khrushchev also removed Georgy Zhukov from the Ministry of Defense.

Kojève’s note opens with a geographical corrective: Russia is not located in the East but the very West of Europe. Soviet culture is “a (very simplified) replica of French civilization halted in its development around 1890 and adapted to the mental state of a 12-year-old child.” At the outset, Kojève makes no secret of his disdain for the Soviet Union—and the United States. The average Russian citizen is compared to “the inhabitant of Oklahoma,” who ignores everything that happens outside of his province. However, unlike the Oklahoman, who views his remote locale superior, even a Muscovite must admit that any provincial town in France is more developed than the Soviet capital. (In this regard, the Russian is even “worse” than the Oklahoman because of his inferiority complex.)

One interlocutor is crucial to understanding Kojève’s view on the Soviet Union during the Thaw. In 1955, Kojève began a friendly correspondence with the German legal and political scholar Carl Schmitt, who was discredited after his affiliation with the Nazi Party. Schmitt’s 1932 book, *The Concept of the Political*, examined the nature of politics based on the dichotomy between enemy and friend. Kojève’s Moscow note is clearly shaped by Schmitt’s political thought. Instead of Kojève’s envisioned “universal and homogeneous state,” the 1950s marked the advent of “groupings of

states allied in ‘empires’ engaged in competition stripped of the political” (De Vries 2001, p. 92). In short, global politics had been replaced by a *Cold War* between friend and enemy.

In January 1957, a few months before Kojève’s voyage to Moscow, Schmitt invited Kojève to Düsseldorf to lay out his ideas of Europe’s new economic colonialism: “a kind of European Marshall Plan for North Africa” (De Vries 2001, p. 93). In line with his activities at the French government’s *Direction des Relations Économiques Extérieures* (D.R.E.E.), Kojève’s talk, entitled “Colonialism from a European Perspective,” develops the—from today’s view in many ways problematic—idea of a “giving” colonialism. Like his Moscow note, the provocative lecture was never published but read by his colleagues at the French Ministry. A manifesto of colonialism, Kojève’s text also criticizes Soviet Marxism. Claiming that Henry Ford “was the only great, authentic Marxist of the twentieth century,” Kojève writes:

Be that as it may, the fact is that today, the capitalism described and criticized by Marx, i.e. old-style capitalism, which created investment capital by artificially limiting the income of the working class to the minimum for subsistence, no longer exists in any industrialized country except for Soviet Russia. Where it is, moreover, called “socialism” if not “communism,” but demonstrates the same sociopolitical [...] side effects as the European capitalism of the nineteenth century. In full conformity with Marxist theory. [...] In other words: in no industrialized country except for Russia today is there a “proletariat” in the Marxist sense, i.e. really poor classes of the population who can only just subsist and have no real affluence. (Kojève 2001, pp. 117–119)

Kojève argues in a Schmittian vein that the *political* itself has ceased to exist in the Soviet Union. In a letter to Schmitt from May 1955, Kojève asks: What would “anti-communist” Russians want? “The same as the ‘communist’ ones,” he replies in the next sentence, “to live well and peacefully.” Hence, the only difference between Khrushchev and Malenkov is that “the former thinks that the latter wants it too fast.” Since both essentially want the same thing, their divide is “not a *political* problem, and to that end neither war nor revolution is necessary, nor a state at all, but just an administration”—which is already fully evolved (Kojève and Schmitt 2001, p. 98). Administration in the Soviet Union is post-political: it operates without any existing party. Not only does the Communist Party no longer exist, it also will not appear any time soon in the Soviet Union. Thus, a coup d’état is highly unlikely.

Kojève describes the “Anti-Party Group” around Malenkov as bourgeois “old style” communists. Even this Stalinist cell within the party would not be able to exert any significant global influence, for instance in East Asia. However, Kojève’s prognosis is that the fall of Khrushchev is necessary; sooner or later; Khrushchev will be replaced either by a more bourgeois politician or a marshal from the Army. One of the most compelling parts of the note is on Soviet foreign politics in relation to the US. Kojève notes that the most significant geopolitical factor is the Soviet Union’s military superiority over America. From a Russian perspective, a long-term agreement with the US is inevitable. The Americans, on the other hand, benefit from an extension of the nuclear arms race, as it does not affect their standard of life in the same way.

Kojève's view on Soviet Marxism is written against the backdrop of the French Left shifting towards an anti-Soviet stance from the mid-1950s onwards. In their July/September 1957 issue, the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (1949–1967), which included Jean-François Lyotard and Cornelius Castoriadis, began to publicly denounce "Communist totalitarianism" (*Socialisme ou Barbarie* 2018, p. 12). In "On the Content of Socialism," Pierre Chaulieu (a pseudonym of Castoriadis) proclaimed that the Russian revolution did not lead to socialism but to "a new and monstrous form of exploitative society and totalitarian oppression that differed from the worst forms of capitalism only in that the bureaucracy replaced the private owners of capital and 'the plan' took the place of the 'free market'" (*ibid.*, p. 249).

If socialism was defined by the peoples' autonomy, the Soviet model would be just another form of bureaucratic capitalism. Strikingly close to Castoriadis, in his talk in Düsseldorf, Kojève argues that Soviet "socialism" is distinguished from "Fordist" capitalism only in so far as the surplus value is invested by the state, not private individuals. In that sense, the Soviet "socialism" that Kojève experienced during his visit in the summer of 1957 was nothing but capitalism in a new guise. However, in his note, Kojève also indicates that while Russia's economic development was similar to the earlier one by Western European countries it was implemented less violently. In other words, for Kojève, the Soviet model of industrialization was less "totalitarian" than Western capitalism.

Kojève was not the only high-profile émigré who returned for the first time to the Soviet Union after Stalin's death. Back from his trip to Moscow, where he stayed at Lilya Brik's house, Russian linguist Roman Jakobson wrote an enthusiastic letter to Vladimir Vernadsky in June 1956:

Not the slightest political conflict arose. [...] I was entirely free in my movements and relations, and saw really hundreds of old friends, acquaintances and colleagues. [...] One could characterize the mood as the honeymoon of a security and relative freedom after the incredible terror of the post-war years. I was strongly impressed by how the great majority of scholars, poets, etc., not only of our generation, but even the younger ones, remained, despite years of obligatory camouflage, actually the same people whom you and I knew during our student years. The attitude towards the administration is: *noli tangere*. [...] Nobody is able to predict the further development, but everybody is convinced that there is no return to Stalin's times. (Brinley 2023, pp. 353f)

Through the eyes of Jakobson, Moscow of the Thaw appears as a haven of freedom. Only a year later, Kojève reports a less rosy view on Khrushchev's Soviet Union. For Kojève, not much hope awaits his former compatriots. In August 1957, history might not have ended after all.

Declarations

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