

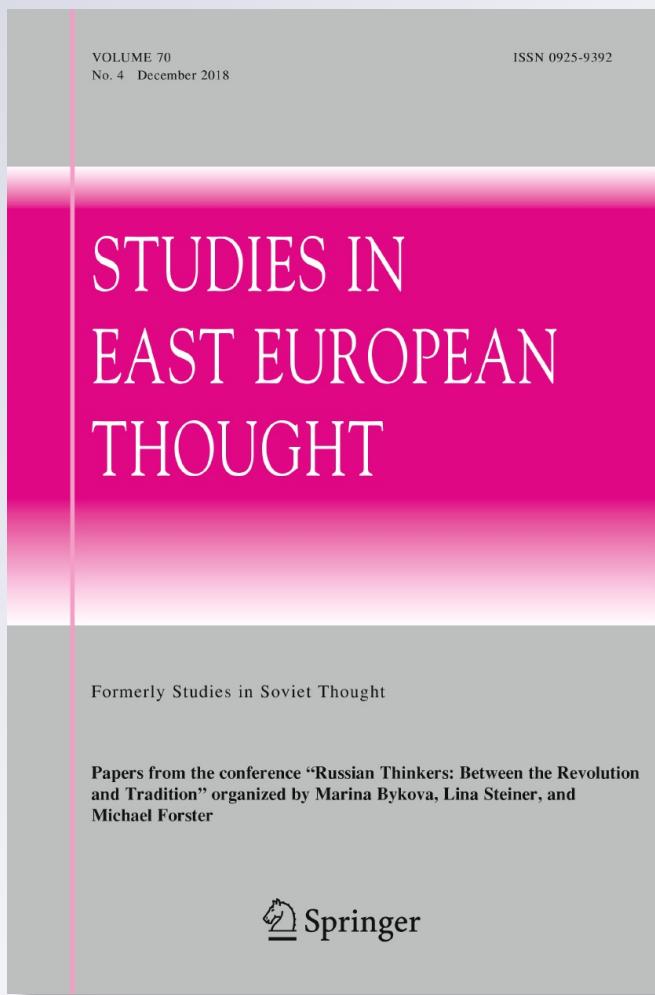
# *The ethical catastrophe of contemporary Russia and its foresights in Russian thought*

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# The ethical catastrophe of contemporary Russia and its foresights in Russian thought

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## Abstract

This paper examines the changing ethical consciousness in Russia since the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and discusses how this change was reflected in Russian religious philosophy. This process can be characterized by a series of sudden and violent replacements of contradictory ethical models, which, by disorientating the public consciousness, led to the atrophy of the ethical instinct. The last two models in the series correspond to the “anti-ethics” of the 1990s and the “non-ethics” of the third Millennium. The latter model (“non-ethics”) corresponds to the current absence of individual ethical positions and the willingness to adopt any position prescribed by the state. A review of philosophical reflection on this process shows that Russian religious thought did not foresee such an ethical catastrophe. Indeed, although Vladimir Solovyov presented an alarming eschatological foresight of the future, and despite the fact that the collection *Landmarks*, written in 1907, firmly identified the intelligentsia as a highly destructive agent promoting their own alternative ethics, the optimistic philosophical model nonetheless prevailed. According to this optimistic model, the period of disasters and catastrophes will be followed by a new spiritual reawakening.

**Keywords** Ethics · Russian philosophy · Russia · USSR · Bolshevik turnover · Soviet totalitarianism · Post-Soviet ethics

## From infinity to zero: the fall of Russian hyper-ethicism

The first reconstructions of Russian national consciousness introduced by Slavophiles strongly support the view that it is specifically distinguished by the primacy of its ethics—a *sui generis* hyper-ethicism. Experts in the field find that, starting with its Kievan roots, the Russian mind was drawn not so much to philosophy, theology,

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or contemplative spirituality, but rather to ethical problems, which received unconditional priority. Concluding his vast study of Ancient Russia's religious culture, Georgy Fedotov writes: "The concentration on ethical problems [is found] throughout all of Russia's religious literature... The ethical direction was dominant. The key problem was: How to live and what to do for one's salvation? And the fact that the answer was sought, in the first place, in the ethical way of life... marked an important difference between Russian and Byzantine spirituality" (Fedotov 2001, 347). In particular, the ethical principles of Christian love and mercy constituted the highest values for the Russian mind and society.

The theories of the early Slavophiles stress this primacy of ethics even more insistently. As Khomiakov states, "Russia should be either the most moral, that is, the most Christian of all human societies, or nothing" (Khomjakov 1914, 337). To this point, Konstantin Aksakov offers a detailed conception of the Russian worldview, which is entirely penetrated and governed by ethics. He is convinced that there is a uniquely Russian type of society, of which the basic principle is ethical. Such a principle can be expressed as the "free moral concord of all." The society that puts it into practice, the famous "*obshchina*," or peasant commune, is defined by Aksakov as "a union of people who have renounced their egoism." This commune is "based on love, a supreme Christian action... [which results in] a moral choir, in which no one loses his voice... [and in which] each person is heard in harmony with others" (Aksakov 1889a, 279–280). In this society, moral ties are so strong that legal rules become unnecessary and even harmful. Here, Aksakov insists: "Legal guarantees are an evil! ... All strength resides in moral convictions... [for] Russia has always believed in them and never relied on contracts" (Aksakov 1889b, 18). Moreover, this hyper-ethical construct, in which "the only foundation of society is a common moral conviction," was represented not just as a philosophical conception, but as the true description of Russian society, or, more exactly, as its very core, the "Land" conceived as a communal unity. It is important to note that the opponents of the Slavophiles, the Westerners who defended the rights and dignity of the individual person, also accepted and supported the primacy of ethics, though in a different way. In sum, there was a consensus among both the Slavophiles and Westerners that the cornerstone of Russian mentality would be the primacy of ethics or, more specifically, the Christian ethics of love and mercy. This conception served as a foundation for early Russian ethical consciousness.

Now let me turn to the present-day situation. Regrettably, there is a notable absence of analytical and conceptual studies concerning the current ethical situation in Russia. This fact is significant as it suggests an absence of ethical reflection. Thus, I have to base my discussion of the present ethical climate mostly on empirical materials.

All observations of the present-day ethical situation share one constant leitmotif: the *annihilation of ethics*. They all find that Russia today lacks ethical consciousness. While it is true that ethical discourse is present to some extent, it is purely subsidiary in nature as its principles and contents are largely determined by state's interests, which can frequently change. As one recent study put it, "decisions on what constitutes "good" and "evil" are made by competent organs," i.e. the state and its various actors. The annihilation of ethics is most

explicitly expressed by the well-known author and journalist Dmitry Glukhovsky, who writes that the “transformations in the country [include] … the decay of ethics and the abolition of the notions of good and evil on all social levels from top to bottom.” This decay “is not only practiced but preached from the highest levels [of government] … there [one can find] neither darkness nor light, for everybody is dirty, and everybody is stained.” In other words, these “standards of behavior are set up by the state’s top figures… and [then] sent out down the pyramid… [in this way] the re-education of the population is carried out in the spirit of total contempt for the notions of the good and evil” (Glukhovskij 2017). The St. Petersburg philosopher, Ivan Mikirtumov, adds that “[today] the social and political process [resembles a group of hungry and poisonous spiders in a can… [the] relations of [these] spiders… are based on general mistrust, suspiciousness, disinformation… [and] participants of the process are cynical to the extreme.” Mikirtumov elaborates this last point by saying that the “cynicism penetrating Russian society has its active source in the “manners and customs” of the elite … [and that] the price for this… is the degradation of society and the state, which [is occurring] right now… [and creating a] unique kind of human community completely devoid of any morals” (Mikirtumov 2016). The well-known film director, Sergey Loznitsa, expressed a similar view: “everything [that] seemed recently to be immoral… has turned into the norm today. One gets accustomed to this norm, [and] one becomes deeply attached to it” (Loznitsa 2017). Comparable views were also expressed by the Nobel Laureate, Svetlana Aleksievich. Similarly, the renowned writer Daniil Granin, who enjoyed great authority in Russian society, said in one of his last interviews that “fraud and forgery became an unalienable part of our life… Why is there such an upsurge of aggression, bitterness and hostility in Russia? The country is ill, and I would not undertake to cure it” (Granin 2017).

In addition to these general assessments, there are many statements concerning particular aspects and phenomena within Russian society. One actively discussed theme is the systematic revision of the country’s history, and again utter contempt for the ethical dimension appears to be a key feature of this revision. In promoting certain interpretations of historical figures and events, ethical judgments are completely rejected in the favor of state interests. The hotly debated restoration of the cults of Stalin and Ivan the Terrible is one example of the general strategy to withdraw ethics from history, but there are many other examples. Recently, a new cathedral was opened in one of the principal church centers in Moscow, the Sretensky Monastery—headed by bishop Tikhon (Shevkunov), a very influential church official connected to the President of Russia—dedicated to the New Martyrs, who were the Christian victims of the Bolshevik regime. The monastery is in the vicinity of Lubyanka, a notorious area densely occupied by the State Security service, which has been there since the days of the Great Terror, when shootings took place on the monastery grounds. Now some branches of the ministry, which organized those murders, continue to work on this territory, just next door to the new cathedral, and members of the staff from both places, the cathedral and the State Security service, try to maintain neighborly relations. Both organizations are proud of their heritage, and both are considered to have contributed to the greatness and glory of Russia;

the New Martyrs and the Chekists who murdered them. But evidently, the uniting of two diametrically opposite ethical positions, that is, the ethics of the atheist butchers and the ethics of their Christian victims, amounts to the annihilation of ethics as such.

The same drastic ethical trajectory, from infinity to zero, can be found in several principal branches of ethics. In social ethics, it was always assumed that the cornerstone of Russian mentality was maximal collectivism. This claim, which advances the cult of the commune, is one of the very few things shared by Bolshevik ethics and old Slavophiles. However, nobody can characterize today's Russian mentality as collectivistic. To the contrary, many sociologists find that Russian society is now characterized by an extreme separateness and disunity amongst its citizens, and that this level of mutual distrust is among the highest in the world. The erstwhile collectivism is now completely destroyed. A similar situation can also be found in sexual ethics, once famously characterized with the saying: "There is no sex in the Soviet Union!" In the past, it was taken for granted that an organic part of Soviet ethics, in addition to Soviet manners and customs, was extreme chastity. But this hyper-chastity had the same destiny as the hyper-collectivism. I have seen it with my own eyes: in Moscow, along the roads leading to airports, long lines of women openly selling their bodies, sometimes stretching for hundreds of meters. The situation is similar in other parts of Russia.

Thus, the final stage in the evolution of Russia's ethical consciousness is a society without any ethical principles in the public sphere. Of course, in the private sphere elementary, everyday morality is still acknowledged, but even here the powerful state influence which seeks to distance itself from ethical considerations can still be felt. A society without ethics is a new social phenomenon, and its emergence gives rise to many questions and concerns. If we want to address these problems in their entirety, we must first reconstruct the historical development of this phenomenon and retrace its trajectory to the current ethical catastrophe; this is the main purpose of this paper.

## How this happened

From the start, it should be emphasized that prerevolutionary Russia did not correspond to the ideal image of a land shaped by the unconditionally dominant Christian ethics, neither in public nor private life. In fact, prior to the Revolution considerable forces were already present which were prerequisite for the future ethically destructive processes. Orthodox ethics was flagging and mostly passive, reflecting the state of the Church and Orthodox faith in general. As Church historians have found, during the prerevolutionary period "mass de-ecclesialization (*rastserkovlenie*) of the people was [taking place]," as "faith was no longer the basis of the peasants' worldview, but only a part of the traditional set-up" (Belonogova 2003, 180). But perhaps the most crucial prerequisite was the emergence of the alternative ethical and ideological model provided by the *intelligentsia*. This specific phenomenon has been recognized as the main factor that split Russian society, at least since the famous collection *Landmarks*, released in 1907. The *intelligentsia* created its own

oppositional, atheistic, and revolutionary ethics, which gained enormous popularity. The co-habitation of these two conflicting and colliding ethical models within Russian consciousness was the origin of all future misfortunes arising from this incompatibility.

Following the October Revolution, this revolutionary ethics became the victorious and dominant ethical model within Russia. The first of its kind, this abrupt ethical reorientation was proceeded by a century-long chain of similarly drastic changes to the prevailing ethical model. A new ethical formation emerges, the *ethics of the Revolution and Civil War*. It was a vigorous and aggressive ethical system, fomenting the hostility and hatred of the lower social strata toward the higher strata, and it declared open war on the former Orthodox model; “Let’s fire a bullet at Holy Russia!”, Red Guards exclaim in Alexander Blok’s *“The Twelve”*. This “new proletarian ethics” was also defiantly extremist, as it was an ethics of class hatred justifying the Red Terror and other atrocities and reprisals committed by the Bolsheviks. It is also important to note how these changes were implemented. Immediately after their victory, the Bolsheviks started to cultivate a strategy of violent changes and transformations. This violent character was purposely stressed by means of a special discourse repeatedly and persistently using such terms as “the break” (*lomka*), “break-up” (*slom*), and “breaking” (*perelom*). It was a strategy of social and anthropological engineering which sought to ruthlessly break the natural and organic fabrics of societal and individual consciousness, and it was most traumatic and destructive for ethical consciousness.

After the Civil War, there came the intermediate period of the twenties during which the Bolshevik compromised temporarily with some elements of the old social order and way of life, while at the same time steadily advancing toward total domination. This period was fruitful in terms of cultural life, but in regard to ethical life it so was controversial and dubious that Boris Pasternak called it “the most ambiguous and false of all Soviet periods.” Although old “bourgeois” and religious morals and values were loudly rejected, in practice they were still followed to no small extent. Surely, such a situation could not provide any firm grounds for nurturing an ethical consciousness, but rather added to its disorientation, throwing up great temptations.

The next period, that of Stalinist totalitarianism, brought the most inhuman and cruel of all ethical formations. In regard to ethical consciousness it is the most important period following 1917, for it has had the most significant and protracted after-effects. Although totalitarianism radically transformed all ethical spheres, the ethics of Soviet totalitarianism is a subject which remains largely understudied and insufficiently understood. I briefly summarize its principal features below.

The specific distinctions of this ethical model begin with its highest principle: the devoted loyalty of the people to the ruling group, i.e. the party, its leader, and its teachings (which are declared to be absolute truths). Such a principle makes this ethical model different from all traditional ethical systems and brings it closer to the ethical codes of criminal gangs, which are also based on personal loyalty to the ruling group and its leader. All other ethical values, norms, and rules are subordinate to this principle and must be rejected when they contradict it.

The next basic principle is violence. Loyalty to the regime is ensured through large-scale, systematic terror that coercively enforces reprisals against any and all

non-loyal persons, including those who are allegedly non-loyal or merely suspicious—these persons are branded “public enemies.” Violence with respect to them, including murder, is considered to be a moral act; consequently, an enormous, all-encompassing machinery of terror was created and maintained, covering the country with a web of prisons and concentration camps. As another consequence, the hatred which accompanied such rampant violence became one of the main components of social ethics. This hatred was actively stirred-up until it formed an archaic ritualistic consciousness. In a totalitarian society, the hatred and reprisals against persecuted groups and persons actualize the archaic paradigms of the scapegoat (as described by René Girard) and *Homo Sacer* (as described by Giorgio Agamben). There were rites, such as public meetings with crowds demanding the death penalty for purported enemies, that turned all involved into symbolic participants in the murders. This corresponds exactly to the ritual sacrifice of the scapegoat. Then there were categories of humans, such as fugitives from camps, whom everybody could legally kill, as is the case with the *Homo Sacer*. Sinking into archaic patterns is one of the key features of totalitarian consciousness, and these patterns produce rich ethical implications.

It is interesting that the revival of this archaic consciousness and primitive cult-like mentality combined with militant atheism and a fierce hostility towards religion. Soviet ethics is strongly atheistic and antireligious. Cruel repressions against religion in all its forms, not just against the institutions themselves but against their servants and believers, was an important feature of the terror campaigns. Such hostility proceeded organically from Marxist–Leninist doctrine that claimed to be a science and defended rationalism. However, this official argumentation merely served to hide the real motivations behind Soviet hostility towards religion. These true motivational forces lie very far from scientific arguments, for the Soviet totalitarian mind is de facto not rationalistic at all, but rather, absorbed by the patterns of primitive and archaic cults.

When taken together, the two basic principles of party loyalty and violence imposed deeply disruptive changes within the social ties of the time, and within all manners of life, including the elementary ethical codes of everyday behavior and social contact. It was each citizen’s duty to denounce all persons not loyal to the regime, as well as all forms of non-loyalty, failure to do so being a crime subject to harsh punishment. Almost immediately after someone had been denounced came the subsequent arrests of those implicated. Moreover, a net of secret informers (which is used by the majority of world’s secret services) grew to fantastic proportions within the USSR, so that people began to fear their presence in any company or group. As the archbishop Vasily (Krivošein), (a Russian émigré of noble origin who sometimes visited the USSR) noticed, “under Soviet conditions, people are painfully suspicious and suspect a KGB man in everybody, even when he is not such” [Arkhiepiskop Vasily (Krivošein) (2014), 360]. These features of Soviet life generated an atmosphere of pervasive mistrust and fear that had a strong corrupting effect on all spheres of life, both public and private, and subsequently destroyed the ties of family, friendship, and profession.

In addition to these totalitarian features, there were some principles, such as Soviet collectivism and labor for the benefit of society, that were declared to be

necessary parts of the Soviet citizen's moral code. However, there was a sharp contradiction between these principles, which demanded public and regular expressions of allegiance from the people, and actual Soviet life, which was characterized by general mistrust and suspicion. This contradiction undermined any sense of collectivism and gave rise to hypocrisy and lies that spread to all levels of public life. These unfortunate features eventually became the most characteristic and lasting impacts of Soviet-era consciousness on ethical behavior.

The next change of the ethical model was less radical and abrupt; in fact, there were almost no changes at all in its official state-declared components. What took place instead was a shift in the importance of certain elements within the existing Stalinist totalitarian model. The primary element of the official Soviet doctrine, the Marxist-Leninist teaching, which included the basic principles of Soviet ethics, was declared to be forever unchangeable. However, some changes did occur in and around this key feature. In reality, the period of "late Soviet totalitarianism," from Stalin's death until the fall of the Soviet Union (which includes the sub-periods of Khrushchev's "thaw" and Brezhnev's "stagnation"), was a time of gradual erosion and disintegration of the state doctrine, accompanied by sporadic attempts at its partial renewal. In its ethical dimension, this was a period of hesitant moves to humanize the state doctrine. Its most inhumane aspects, including class hatred and the ruthless extermination of public enemies, were pushed out, but, on the other hand, liberal ideas such as the sovereignty of human rights and the slogan of "socialism with a human face" were rejected as revisionist heresy. The regime also tried to preserve total control over the consciousness of people, but in the absence of mass terror these efforts could be only partially successful.

The unwillingness of the state to relinquish its influence contributed to a long series of feeble compromises between the adoption of some elements of humanist and Christian ethics, including the ethics of mutual respect and dialogue, and the assertoric priority of doctrinal "Marxist-Leninist ethics." To highlight the superficial aspect of these compromises one needs to look no further than "The Moral Code of the Builder of Communism" (1961), which was drafted under Khrushchev's order in a mere one and a half hours, according to the testimony of Fyodor Burlatsky, its principal author. Clearly, such compromises were mediocre and superficial improvisations that could never reach the level of sound ethical conceptions. As time went on, it became more and more evident that the rulers who demanded the ideological and ethical orthodoxy of the citizenry, i.e. the "builders of communism," did not stick to such orthodoxy themselves, and further, had no clear understanding of what this orthodoxy entailed. Unfortunately, this situation only served to augment the confusion and disorientation felt in the ethical consciousness of the day. Within this consciousness, there was a mixture of components that pushed it towards total cynicism, that is, to the destruction and degradation of ethics as such. Although the reprisals and fear of the past were still present, these elements were not as pronounced as they once were. Consequently, the rulers and their Marxist dogma lost the (forced) respect of people and became objects of mockery and jokes. This unique combination of fear and derisive disrespect produced the specific phenomenon found in late-Soviet consciousness, which I once defined in the terms of Soviet slang as 'smart-ass servility,' (*khitrozhopaja pokhornost'*). This type of consciousness characterizes

"the habits of servants of an aged, batty, but still formidable master; the eager readiness to lie for the sake of one's peace and profit; and cowardly egoism with a cynical smirk" (Horujy 1999, 125). When understood in this manner, it is easy to see how the process of ethical degradation only became more and more noticeable.

This process quickly reached its zenith after the fall of the Communist regime. Of course, the end of totalitarianism gave the public a chance to overcome the ethical catastrophe; however, this opportunity was never realized. The necessary first step in overcoming an ethical situation involves being aware of it, and the second step that follows must invariably lead to repentance; this is the universal paradigm of ethical recovery. At first, there was a brief surge of moral enthusiasm when the theme of repentance was raised and discussed, and indeed, repentance was presented as a necessary strategy for the public consciousness. But the general reaction was either half-hearted or negative, and so the path of repentance was largely rejected. In reality, this rejection was the first free ethical act of post-Soviet consciousness, and we see a posteriori that it acted as a litmus test which determined the direction of further ethical development. As has been said, "the numbness of the national conscience is the most pronounced symptom of illness" (Fedotov 2013, 11).

The change which occurred within the ethical model was devastating. Once again, total cynicism became the prevailing dominant attitude towards ethics. Moreover, this anti-ethical attitude had no obstacles that could block its practical realization, for the fall of the Soviet regime brought about not only the disappearance of the communist dictatorship, its dogma, and repressive social machinery, but a general state of decay and havoc as well. Many social institutes faltered in their responsibility to keep law and order, leading to the collapse of ethical norms and barriers, including those that were not connected to communist dogma. As a result, a very specific way of life arose in Russia in the early nineties. During this time, the ugliest and most inhumane practices, including murder and other crimes, could be pursued with virtual impunity, for they were taken to be quite admissible by the social consciousness of the time and regarded as no longer requiring ethical censure. Some of these practices were even popularized and considered to be prestigious occupations; the trades of being a bandit, killer, or prostitute were treated with a special interest and respect, for instance. At this stage of development, the de-coupling of society and ethics was nearly complete. The ethical consciousness that followed can be qualified as a *sui generis* anti-ethics—a peculiar ethical formation that legitimizes the worst acts of immorality and criminal behavior. One could regard such a pathological formation as the fruit born from the general decay and disaster in post-Soviet Russia, but this interpretation is incorrect, for in fact the comparatively larger disaster of the Great Patriotic War brought about a certain ethical improvement and not, as might be assumed, a further state of degradation. The reason for this improvement lies in the fact that the common struggle against mortal danger was a strong purifying factor for societal consciousness. Thus, the emergence of the anti-ethical outlook of the 1990s must be regarded as the result of the preceding process of cruel experiments, violent breaks, and confusing regressions within the field of ethics.

Evidently, the dire mess of Eltsin-era Russia and its anti-ethics could not have continued for too long. The next period, which I call that of 'non-ethics,' is the present ethical period that started with the new Millennium. In the social and

economic sector, this period is marked by a relative stabilization and normalization. However, in the ethical dimension degradation didn't stop, it entered a new phase. The emerging ethical formation, which I briefly described in the introduction, should now be fully addressed in order to draw our final conclusions.

The present state of Russian ethical consciousness was characterized as the absence of ethics, but this characterization is not quite right. It would be more correct to say that today, at any given moment, the social consciousness accepts certain ethical norms and principles, which may even be quite rigorous, but it is only a formal and superficial acceptance because, at the next moment, this consciousness would be ready to accept any other principles imposed by state power. Consequently, the public consciousness of the day has no ethical position of its own; it has become ethically indifferent or, in other words, caught up by the atrophy of the ethical instinct. For this reason, it is completely submissive to official dictums and manipulation, and agrees willingly to the notion that "decisions on what is "good" and "evil" are made by competent organs." Present-day Russia provides us with numerous examples of ethical decisions made by "competent organs" that are accepted by the public in an obedient and timely manner. They include the ethical approval of all of Russia's actions on the global stage, the appraisal of events of past and recent Russian history, etc. It is this complete atrophy of the ethical instinct and the absence of one's own ethical position that I call 'non-ethics.' It is the final result of a century's long series of violent breaks, twists and turns carried out within Russian ethical consciousness.

This current mode of ethical consciousness exerts pressure on many spheres of life, both individual and social. In the first place, it manifests itself directly in political life; the arrival of non-ethics could thereby explain many peculiar features of today's Russian political reality. On the other hand, the connection between ethics and politics seems to be two-sided; state power uses ethics in the service of politics, and the ethical positions imposed on the public consciousness, i.e. "decisions on what is 'good' and 'evil,'" are entirely dictated by current political interests. Of course, the exploitation of ethical feelings for the sake of political goals is a practice that has been employed by every ruler throughout history, but normally such exploitations do not devolve into pervasive and inescapable manipulation. It is the same thing with violence; although violence has been used by all regimes, when it is total, it is the mark of a specific regime, totalitarianism. In regard to non-ethics, its ubiquitous presence means that Russian ethical consciousness is approaching a state of total servility without an inkling of resistance.

The economic sphere is affected as well. Taking protestant ethics as an example, Max Weber demonstrated that ethical consciousness determines the principal features of economic life and its strategies. This makes it very likely that at least some of the principal features of Russia's present-day economic situation, such as incorrigible hyper-corruption, are also rooted in the domination of non-ethics. As for the anthropological and humanistic spheres, wherein ethics plays a constitutive role, the domination of non-ethics is undoubtedly a corruptive and destructive force. Non-ethics makes human relations degrade, degenerate, and it eventually destroys them; the same outcome holds true for all spheres of culture.

Thus, in contrast to anti-ethics, the rise of non-ethics is not so much tolerated as directly cultivated and managed by state power. In the short-term, this might contribute to social and political stability and thereby bring political dividends to the ruling party, but in the long-term, non-ethics is no less abnormal and pernicious than anti-ethics. It means the atrophy of the ethical instinct, which makes any sound existence for human society and culture impossible. In other words, non-ethics amounts to a profound degeneration in all spheres of life and results in fatal consequences for the society that accepts it.

*Mutatis mutandis*, the non-ethical formation can be likened, paradoxically, to Michel Foucault's project of an "esthetics of existence". As I show in my discussion of this project (Horujy 2015), the ethical mode in question is entirely replaced by a certain, specific form of esthetics, and one can agree that this liquidation of ethics in favor of esthetics is similar to the liquidation of ethics in favor of pragmatic and momentary politics (although it is harshly un-esthetic). In both cases, we can see the manifestation of the strong modern trend that leads to the birth of *post-ethics*.

## The ethical catastrophe and Russian philosophy

What we have described so far is the process behind the de-coupling of ethics from Russian public consciousness. Now we must ask the question: How is this process reflected in Russian philosophy? *A priori*, two kinds of reflection are possible, the foresight of the process, when it was still to come or had just started, and the *reaction* to it, when it was in full swing. In pre-revolutionary Russia, philosophy was flourishing, and the thinkers of the Silver Age did not refrain from expressing their sense of what the future development of the country, its society, and culture would be. The discourse of foresight in Russian philosophy is of special interest to us, as the recent history of Russia has been full of unexpected turns. However, this discourse turns out to be rather poor, especially in terms of its ethical themes.

The undisputable founder of the discourse in question is Vladimir Solovyov. Beginning with his poem "Panmongolism" (1894), the final period of his life came to be dominated by reflections on the future of Russia and mankind in which eschatological and apocalyptic themes prevailed. These themes find their culmination in his famous dialogue, "Three Conversations, including a Brief Tale of the Anti-Christ," which represents a model example of foresight discourse. Solovyov's tale about forthcoming events develops as a free narrative devoid of systematic argument, but is richly endowed with mystical and fantastical elements. Within the philosophy of history, Solovyov protested vigorously against the positivist theory of unlimited progress, while in the tale he recounts an apocalyptic scenario of the provisional triumph of the "false good" brought forth by the Anti-Christ. The ethics of the false good includes all values of secular humanism such as justice, peace, and common prosperity. However, this ethics strictly forbids loyalty to Christ and hope for the resurrection. Nonetheless, the false good is to be eventually defeated in the Second Coming of Christ, which marks the end of world history. Solovyov's eschatological message became very popular and influential in Russian culture during the Silver Age. Despite this popularity, its value lies only in the foresight of great

catastrophes and the awakening of an eschatological feeling; as far as its concrete historical prophecies are concerned, almost none of them came true. In particular, the ethical aspect of Solovyov's foresight has nothing in common with the appalling de-coupling of ethics from Russian society which was to come. Surely, the final stages of this historical process, the rise of anti-ethics and non-ethics, could not be imagined by Solovyov, even in his worst apocalyptic visions.

To be more precise, Solovyov's eschatological and mystical message was of importance primarily for the world of literature and the arts, and especially for the Russian Symbolist movement. As for philosophy, it was also under the strong influence of Solovyov, but it drew upon other aspects of his thought, his metaphysics in the first place. As a result, Russian philosophy did not inherit Solovyov's inclination towards prophetic and eschatological discourse, and instead turned to the discourse of foresight only sporadically.

The only significant exception to this rule was the conception of the Slavonic Renaissance, sometimes referred to as the Third Renaissance. It is a model example of the discourse surrounding foresight, but, in contrast to the apocalyptic foresight of Solovyov, this foresight is developed chiefly developed within the philosophy of culture. The core of this conception is the idea that Russia has to become the cradle of a new cultural epoch, that is, a new "Renaissance" that continues the chain of cultural phenomena linking the Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth century and the German Renaissance of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This conception was independently propounded at the beginning of the twentieth century by two great specialists of Ancient Greek culture, Thaddeus Zieliński and Vyacheslav Ivanov. It was immediately and enthusiastically supported by their young disciples, some of whom went on to organize the ephemeral "Union of the Third Renaissance". The key idea of this conception was that "Russia and the Slavonic world are called ... to the creation of a new culture" (Nemov 1915, 23). But the cardinal question: 'Which cultural model should the Slavonic Renaissance revive?'—received no definitive answer. The only monograph expounding this conception, "*The Idea of the Slavonic Renaissance*," written in 1915 by A. Nemov (a pseudonym of the young muscovite philosopher, Alexei Toporkov), stated that the cultural model should be based on the Alexandria of Late Antiquity. However, there were other suggestions as well. Interestingly, the Bolshevik revolution was not considered, at first, to be the antithesis of this idea; on the contrary, in 1919 Mikhail Bakhtin and Lev Pumpianski organized the performance of Sophocles's "*Oedipus in Colon*" in the tiny city of Nevel, where some 500 pupils from local schools participated in the open-air performance. But, of course, any further development of the idea became impossible soon after, and it was quickly forgotten. Nevertheless, this moment still represents an important episode in the history of Russian consciousness. Because it was a cultural project conceived by two acknowledged leaders of the Silver Age just before the period's end, it was one of the last comments by this culture on its own nature. As I have written elsewhere, the "Slavonic Renaissance is the un-incarnated essence of the unrealized Russian future" (Horujy 2000, 125).

Evidently, although this project involved some of the brightest Russian minds of the time, and thus could not be regarded merely as an empty dream, it only took the cultural dimensions of reality into account and completely ignored the social,

political, and ethical dimensions. As a result, it was over-optimistic and eventually had nothing in common with Russia's real future. In particular, it could not foresee the fatal process of Russia's ethical degradation.

Russian thinkers in the Silver Age did not develop their discourse of foresight very systematically. Their brief foresights, especially those following the beginning of the First World War, usually represent ambivalent (but eventually positive) scenarios which predict great catastrophes and severe ordeals, followed, *malgré tout*, by the final victory of the good. Such is Berdyaev's scenario in the *Destiny of Russia*, which was written during the First World War. As he writes,

One can think that the world enters [a] long period of troubles and hardships, and that the tempo of its development will be catastrophic, [while nonetheless maintaining that] “[this] world catastrophe should promote the deepening of the religious foundations of life ... [for] in society and among the common people [is where the] spiritual and cultural movement of all Slavs should begin, and this movement will eventually influence our politics. (Berdyaev 1990, 138, 142)

In the new epoch, mankind must realize its cosmic mission. This is to say that when “the turn to the cosmic attitude of the world” takes place, the “creative work over nature [that extends] to the cosmic range will [become its] cornerstone,” and that when this happens “the soul of the Russian people, generous, disinterested and tolerant, giving, but not stealing, which is not known yet” will reveal itself (Berdyaev 1990, 138, 141, 134). Again, we see that despite some insightful predictions (such as the cosmic expansion of human practices) this foresight missed the depth and scale of the upcoming social and anthropological changes, and therefore missed the essence of what was to lie ahead, namely, the birth of a new type of society robbed of its ethical consciousness and instinct. By optimistically repeating old songs of the generosity of the Russian soul, it failed to see what was to come in regard to Russia's ethical capacity.

Another typical example of foresight comes from Prince Evgenii Trubetskoi's last book, *The Meaning of Life*, which was finished following the Bolshevik revolution in June of 1918. Of course, the theme of catastrophic events once again prevails here, and is influenced by Solovyov's metaphysics and mysticism. Trubetskoi presents a moderate version of the apocalypse. The present catastrophe, while not the end of the world, nonetheless continues along a chain of great catastrophes that ultimately lead to this end. Furthermore, this catastrophe is conceived as an ambivalent event. Within “the inner connection between catastrophe and higher spiritual elevation... [there lies a] Satanized rabble infringing upon Divine and human law [on one hand], and the highest exploit of the good, i.e. the death of the righteous for the sake of truth, on the other.” Eventually, the beneficial outcomes of the catastrophe are more important than its disastrous effects. On this point, Trubetskoi writes that “the trial on the world is taking place... but for those nations that will be able to become aware of the revelation and hold on to it, the time of great spiritual deeds and the highest creative work begins” (Trubetskoi 1918, 22, 223). The general course of history is also interpreted in a positive perspective similar to Solovyov's, which combines Christian apocalypticism and modern evolutionism. Here Trubetskoi

writes that “the ascent [of humanity], which advances from beast-man to Godman in the process of its evolution, must continue incessantly” (Trubetskoi 1913, 414). As the final chapters of the book were written in the midst of bloody social chaos, Trubetskoi had a chance to record the collapse of public morality. He describes this collapse as a process of “[mass] bestializing [that has corrupted society as a result of the war],” which has thereby led to the “complete degeneration of all public ties.” Consequently, “in all human relations, the same moral code dominates, the code of relentless and ruthless cannibalism” (Trubetskoi 1918, 207, 204). However, such phenomena were not included in his long-term foresight, and it is clear that Trubetskoi did not foresee anything like the long degenerative process that awaited Russia’s ethical consciousness.

Trubetskoi and Berdyaev are extremely different, both in their philosophies and their historical and political views. Nevertheless, we notice the same motifs and the same patterns in their foresights. On the one hand, they predict great catastrophe(s)—disasters, the disintegration of the society, moral downfall and degeneration—but, on the other, they remain optimistic for the spiritual elevation and forthcoming renaissance of the Russian people, for although “the Russian people has fallen low, great potential is concealed in it and great scope can open for it” (Berdyaev 1991, 289). This same pattern is repeated by many authors of the revolutionary period, and it can be considered a *sui generis* common denominator for their views on Russia’s future. However, actual historical events clearly did not correspond to any of their optimistic predictions. As stated before, these patterns simply did not foresee the radical degradation that was to take place within Russia’s ethical consciousness, nor could they see the catastrophic phases of anti-ethics and non-ethics. Although the impetus of Russia’s ethical catastrophe was noticed and recognized as such in its beginning stages, its future course was represented in the wrong way within the prism of superficial and unjustified optimism. Perhaps out of recognition of foresight’s limited predictive power, Semyon Frank, one of the Silver Age’s most sensitive thinkers on the ethical problems of the day and the author of the two best texts on the ethical situation of that time (Frank 1991; *Iz glubiny*, 1918), refrained from any ethical foresight.

One can add that some of the texts written after the Bolshevik Revolution present far-seeing observations concerning the regime’s ethical impact. For example, I.A. Pokrovskij, one of the authors of the collection, *Out of the Depths*, writes of the regime that it

... continues to [systematically] corrupt the people... instead of helping [their] moral recovery ... [for] ever new doses of poison are injected into [them]: [first] particular persons, [then] whole categories of persons are declared ‘public enemies’ and outlawed. (Pokrovskij 1991, 450)

Later on, such observations were complemented by émigré thinkers such as Georgy Fedotov and Fyodor Stepun, as well as by other authors involved with the journal, “New City” (*Novyi Grad*). In their texts, many of the emerging ethical consequences were correctly identified, but here the discourse of foresight reached its limits. Further twists and turns of the ethical consciousness, especially the final post-totalitarian phases of anti-ethics and non-ethics, remained beyond this limit.

Thus, we conclude that the Russian philosophy of the Silver Age, including its final stage of dispersal, did not foresee the ethical catastrophe of modern Russia. Nor, obviously, could philosophy in Soviet Russia do this work. These failures of comprehension and foresight are settled historical events, but events which could nonetheless offer us useful insights in overcoming the current ethical catastrophe through proper and thorough analysis of its content. The challenges of today's ethical consciousness must be fully addressed and settled. This is a task left open to us all.

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