

RUSSIAN PHILOSOPHY

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Overview Russian philosophical thought only emerged in the second half of the 18th century, remaining faithful to its Western founders. However, the contributions of philosophical thought in Russian history had begun earlier despite the restrictions imposed on philosophy by conservative political and religious institutions. With the formation of the first Rus state in the 9th century and the conversion pagan Russia to Christianity in the next century, and the end of Russia's 200 year-subjection to the Mongols in the 15th century, a period marked by isolation and cultural decline, Russians began to increase the level of their intellectual life.

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Russia was introduced to philosophy via religion, specifically through *The Fathers of the Church*, a work translated from Greek shortly after the late 10th century conversion to Christianity. Translations of other religious works, the theological works of St. John Damascene in the 12th century and Dionysius the Areopagite in the 14th, provided the impetus for some Russian clergymen to compose their own works on philosophy and theology.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Filofey (Philotheus) Prokopovich: Regarded as the first Russian philosopher, Filofey of Pskov proposed that Russia was the third Rome, since both the first Rome and second Rome (i.e. Byzantium) were in the hands of heretics. In a work dedicated to Grand Prince Basil II in 1510 he stated: "Two Romes have fallen, the third stands, there shall be no fourth".

Europeanization:

While Russia was cut off from developments in Western European philosophy during the period of Mongol rule, this situation began to be reversed during the reign of Peter the Great. Russian intellectuals began to examine their society through the lens of science and the perspectives of contemporary European thinkers such as Voltaire.

Peter Mogila: Taking his knowledge of Renaissance philosophy and Western scholasticism gained from study in Paris, Mogila established a school for young monks at the Lavra whose curriculum included rhetoric, theology, classical authors and philosophy. In addition, Mogila, converted the Fraternity School into the Kiev-Mogila College where theology was taught under the heading of philosophy.

Feofan Prokopovich: A bishop and theologian who had an important role in reorganizing the Russian Church, Feofan argued for an independent science of man that was in harmony with theology. Feofan, on the basis of the concept of natural law, called for unhindered scientific investigation, religious tolerance, and a secular curriculum.

Gregory Savvich Skovoroda: Although a layman, Skovoroda was a moralist and religious thinker who studied briefly at the Kiev Academy. He refused an offer of a position at the Moscow Theological Academy, instead living as religious mendicant and creating his own doctrine from studies of the Bible, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Diogenes, Philo, neo-Platonists, the Church Fathers and German mystics until his death in 1794.

Enlightenment: In the latter part of the 18th century Catherine the Great presented herself as a supporter of the principles of the Enlightenment, maintaining correspondence with Voltaire and other leading figures of the European Enlightenment. Although in her *"Instruction"* she advocated rational government, equality before the law, and the pursuit of reason, in practice she opposed the French Revolution and bolstered the autocracy.

Nikolay Novikov: During the period of Catherine II's support for free speech and journalism, Novikov was able to use his publishing company, journal, writings and philanthropy to promote Enlightenment principles in Russia. In 1791 the government put an end to Novikov's publishing activities following the publication of "*The Drone*" which criticized the government. Novikov was arrested the following year, imprisoned and held for fifteen years, only gaining his freedom after Catherine II's death.

Alexander Radishchev: During his studies in Leipzig Radishchev became acquainted with the social theories and philosophies of Leibniz, Herder, Helvetius, Locke, Rousseau and Montesquieu. In his work "*Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*" Radishchev, in line with his Enlightenment ideals, expressed his opposition to serfdom, autocracy and corruption. Despite having originally sent Radishchev to Leipzig to study, in the context of the radicalism unleashed by the French Revolution Catherine the Great began to regard him as a threat to the state. Tried as rebel, Radishchev was convicted and given a death sentence that was later reduced to a 10-year exile in Siberia. Freed in 1801, Radishchev took his own life the following year.

NINETEENTH CENTURY

Philosophical Circles: The development of philosophy in Russia was strongly influenced by a number of intellectual circles that emerged after 1815. Nikolay Stankevich's circle, established in the 1830s played a key role in introducing such figures as Granovsky, Bakunin and Belinsky to Hegel's idealism. In the next decade Slavophiles and Westerners discussed on what bases a new Russia should be established, and in the last years of the 1840s the Petrashevsky circle criticized the institution of serfdom and debated how to transform Russian society into a socialist, democratic one.

Slavophiles: In line with German Idealism, Slavophiles argued that Russia should seek solutions to current problems from its own unique culture and traditions, and turned their backs on the Western influences that had begun during the reign of Peter the Great. Slavophiles claimed that three institutions were the basis of Russia's unique character – the Russian Orthodox Church, the tsarist autocracy and the peasant commune. The movement was conservative in its reverence for tradition and the past, presenting a potent vision of an ideal Russia that was in contrast to "the West" that has remained influential even to this day.

Alexey Khomyakov: Khomyakov combined elements of classical German Idealism, and the theories of Hegel and Schelling. In particular he argued that Christianity's spiritual and moral freedom that lay at the heart of Orthodoxy distinguished it from the Catholic Church's "despotic tradition".

Konstantin Aksakov: Aksakov, introduced to the philosophy of Hegel through the Stankevich Circle, interpreted it through the lens of Slavophilism. In addition, in the more relaxed political atmosphere of the latter 19th century Aksakov worked as a playwright and social critic.

Stankevich Circle: Established in 1831 by Nikolay Stankevich, the Stankevich circle was closely linked to the beginning of the Westernizing movement. Among its members were Granovsky, Aksakov, Lermontov, Bakunin, Belinsky, Kavelin, Koltsov, and Botkin. They shared an interest in the philosophy of Hegel, history, literature and Schelling's aesthetics and philosophy of nature. Although sharing many ideas with the Herzen-Ogarev circle, they had no defined political agenda.

Westernizers: In the first half of the 19th century French and German Romanticism had profound influence on Russian thought, and it was in this period that calls were made for government reform, educational improvement, and individual freedom in the light of rationalism and science. For the Westernizers Russia's future lay with Europe and would be based on the ideals of the French Enlightenment, rather than in the romanticized vision of Russia's past presented by the Slavophiles. The Petrashevsky Circle would be instrumental in formulating an adaptation of Western European utopian socialism for Russia.

Petrashevsky Circle: A devotee of the French utopian socialist Charles Fourier, Mikhail Butashevich Petrashevsky organized his group in the 1840s in St. Petersburg. Linked by common interests and a desire to reform Russian society and government, the Petrashevsky Circle met weekly.

Peter Chaadaev: Chaadaev examined Russia's historical role and future in his *Philosophical Letters*, written in the late 1820s. His philosophical understanding is religious in general, and his views on history show French, Catholic influence in particular. Like many members of Russia's educated elite in this period, Chaadaev expressed in his work a sense of powerlessness and apprehension about Russia's future.

Vissarion Belinsky: As a member of Stankevich's circle Belinsky was introduced to the ideas of Hegel and Schelling's philosophy of nature, and later those of French socialism and the German thinker Feuerbach. In contrast to the Slavophiles who argued that Peter I's reforms were responsible for the gap between the common people and the educated elite, Belinsky claimed that the reforms that had created this gap were merely the first step in the modernization of Russia, and that as the necessary reforms of Russian society and politics were carried out, the gap between the elite and the common people would eventually disappear.

Alexander Herzen: During his student years in Moscow at the Physico-Mathematical Faculty Herzen became acquainted with the ideas of St. Simon, Feuerbach, Goethe, Proudhon, Schiller and Hegel. Imprisoned and exiled to northeast Russia in 1834, Herzen emigrated to France in 1847 where he published two magazines, *The Polar Star* and *The Bell*. Herzen's socialism was a major influence on the early Russian revolutionary movement in general, and on the participants in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 in particular. Convinced that Europe was on the verge of collapse and that fundamental reform could only be achieved through protracted, bitter conflict, Herzen urged Russia to reject capitalism and bourgeois society in order to avoid this fate.

Nihilism: Popularized in the novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862) by Ivan Turgenev, nihilism was an ideology that rejected traditional sources of authority, saw individual freedom as its highest goal, claimed that materialism was the only reliable source of knowledge, called for society to be based on rationalism and had tenuous links to a revolutionary movement between 1860-1917. However, nihilism soon degenerated into mere anarchy and by the late 1870s was group linked to terror or political murder could be labelled nihilist.

Existentialism: Advocating individual definitions of meaning in life and the effort to make rational choices in an irrational cosmos, existentialism claims that embracing existence is the only means of finding meaning in universe that lacks, meaning or purpose. Two of the most important Russian existentialists were Feodor Dostoyevsky (particularly in *Notes from the Underground*), and Nikolay Berdyaev, a political and Orthodox thinker.

Anarchism:

Mikhail Bakunin: Considered the founder of collective anarchism, Bakunin was introduced to the ideas of Kant, Fichte and Hegel as a member of Stankevich's circle. Bakunin's role in several political uprisings earned him years in prison, death sentences, and exile to Siberia where he escaped in 1861 to England. From there he went to Italy and eventually Switzerland, where he became an influential figure among Russian and European radicals.

Leo Tolstoy: Tolstoy was a student of Schopenhauer's philosophy whose travels in Europe brought him into contact with Proudhon and other French anarchist intellectuals. Tolstoy's strongest social criticism was aimed at institutionalized religion which he believed had corrupted Christ's true teachings. His Christian anarchism was based on Jesus' stress on resisting evil, which Tolstoy interpreted as *never do violence* to another. According to Tolstoy, Christ had been crucified by the authorities of his time as a conscious response to the threat his teachings posed to social structures based on violence or the threat of violence.

Materialism:

Nicholas Chernyshevsky: Chernyshevsky's thought was shaped by numerous influences – Feuerbach, 18th century French materialism, Hegel, Proudhon, Leroux, St. Simon, and Leroux. Religious until 1848, Chernyshevsky became a materialist, atheist, socialist and democratic republican who advocated the use of the scientific method and denied both divine revelation and the Orthodox tradition. Arrested and

sentenced to penal servitude in Siberia in 1862, Chernyshevsky argued for “rational egoism” in his novel *What Is to Be Done?*.

Dmitry Pisarev: Moving from religious mysticism during his university years to Büchner, Vogt and Moleschott’s crude materialism later in life, Pisarev was proud to be called a “nihilist”. He argued that useless traditions and concepts should be eliminated without mercy.

Populism (Narodnichestvo): The last secular intellectual movement before Marxism in the last decade of the 19th century, Populism advocated agrarian socialism among the Russian peasantry (narod). While Populism may have had its roots in the thought of Herzen and Chernyshevsky, Peter Lavrov was its most important theoretician.

Peter Lavrov: Under the influence of Spencer, Comte, Feuerbach and John Stuart Mill, Lavrov came to believe that science could provide the principles of both creative activity and knowledge. Lavrov hoped that the Russians would be the first to carry out a socialist revolution through common cultivation of the land and sharing the products of their labor. His revolutionary associations led to forced retirement and exile to Vologda in 1866. After escaping from exile Lavrov settled in Paris.

Nicolay Mikhailovsky: Editor of *Russkoe Bogatstvo*, Mikhailovsky was the second most important Populist thinker. Like Lavrov, he was an enthusiast for the views of John Stuart Mill.

Tchaikovsky Circle (Tchaikovtsy): Established by the radical Nicholas Tchaikovsky, the Tchaikovsky began as a literary group promoting self-education, but went on to print, publish and distribute scientific and revolutionary works as it evolved into an activist, Populist (Narodnist) organization in the early 1870s.

Religious Philosophers:

Pochvennichestvo Movement:

Apollon Grigoryev: At one time a member of the pochvenniki group, whose members included Dostoyevsky, Grigoryev claimed that each nation developed in line with its own internal principles, like living organisms. This was in contrast to the ideas of Hegel who argued that nations and societies were merely a series of players in the dialectical advance of history in accordance with the spirit of humanity, or the world-spirit.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky: The existential ideas presented in Dostoyevsky’s work have had a profound influence on Russian and Western thought and have inspired a number of important religious thinkers such as Lev Shestov, Sergey Bulgakov, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Nikolay Berdyaev. In particular, Dostoyevsky wrestled with issues related to anthropology, ethics and philosophies of history, religion and the human spirit.

Naturalism:

Vasily Rozanov: Rozanov’s intellectual roots lay in conservatism and Slavophilism, and was an admirer of Dostoyevsky and Strakhov. As an existentialist, he rejected both commonly accepted religious tenets as well as the revolutionaries’ secular vision. Rozanov considered the teachings of the New Testament to be too focused on death, and espoused an original metaphysics of family life and sexual relations that he believed was more akin to the Old Testament.

Konstantin Leontyev: Worried that Russia would fall under the sway of decadent Western European liberalism and pluralism, Leontiev defended the principles of faith, authority and hierarchy, as well as advocating political and aesthetic ideas in line with those of Nietzsche.

Nicholay Berdyaev: Berdyaev began as an active Marxist, which led to his eventual arrest and three-year exile in Vologda. After moving to St. Petersburg in 1904 Berdyaev abandoned his Marxist views and

immersed himself in study and discussion of the spiritual and mystical aspects of various groups. Despite still considering himself a radical, spiritual development took precedence over political struggle for Berdyaev, so the Bolsheviks' restrictions on personal freedom made the regime unacceptable for him. Berdyaev regarded freedom as a gift from God, who had created the world out of freedom, to humanity. These views led to Berdyaev being arrested twice; after his second arrest he was ordered to leave the country or face execution.

Sophiology:

Vladimir Solovyev: As the founder of the theological doctrines of Sophiology and Godmanhood, and the philosophy of all-unity Solovyev attempted to merge rationalism, mysticism and empiricism in order to better know God, man and nature. He believed that Russia could play an important role in reuniting the Catholic and Orthodox Churches to create the one, true, universal Church.

Sergey Bulgakov: Bulgakov's complex spiritual journey took him from abandoning religion and embracing Marxism, to rejecting Marxism in 1900 and gradually returning to his Orthodox faith. In his effort to refute Positivism and Marxism, Bulgakov focused on creating a religiously-oriented idealism by combining Orthodoxy, Neo-Kantianism and Marxism. He stressed the superiority of God over this material world, although existence in this dimension remained meaningful.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

Mikhail Bakhtin: Philosopher and theoretician, Bakhtin was a literary critic and specialized in the philosophy of language. Regarding language, Bakhtin proposed that the development of language is dynamic, and both affects and is affected by the culture it is a part of.

Bakhtin Circle: As the Russian Revolution was being transformed into Stalin's dictatorship, the Bakhtin Circle examined the cultural and social issues that this process raised. While examining general social issues, they focused primarily on artistic creation the role of language in social conflict.

Dialectical Materialism: Coined by the Russian Marxist Georgy Plekhanov in 1891, dialectical materialism became the official designation of Marxist-Leninist philosophy. Dialectical materialism both rejects all forms of religious or supernatural belief, and asserts that empirical science alone is sufficient for understanding the nature of reality.

Georgy Plekhanov: Plekhanov, considered the father of Russian Marxism, began his activism with the Populists as one of the organizers of the Land and Freedom movement. However, his study of Marx and Engels' ideas while in Geneva convinced him that Marxism rather than Populism would shape Russia's future, since Populism called for an end to Westernization and an independent course of development for Russia.

Vladimir Lenin: By taking dialectical materialism and adapting its tenets to the realities of Russia in his time as well as the revolutionary activity of the Bolsheviks, Lenin came to be regarded as the father of Soviet dialectical materialism. For Lenin dialectical materialism was the most essential concept in "the philosophy of Marxism", the sum total of all ideas found in Marx and Engels' writings.

Alexander Bogdanov: An original thinker who wrote on the role of culture in creating a communist society, Bogdanov also sought to link all the sciences – physical, social and biological – by identifying the organizational principles of these sciences which he regarded as systems of relationships. Bogdanov set down his philosophical and economic ideas in a three-volume work titled *Empiriomonism*. However, Lenin viewed Bogdanov's ideas as a danger to dialectical materialism.

Discussion/Questions

1. Discuss what philosophical ideas flowed into Russia during the Westernization period and the impact of Westernization.
2. Why did Lenin not strictly follow Marxist principles? How did he interpret Marx? How did he combine Russian Narodism (Populism) with Marxism? Can we say that this departure from Marxist principles brought the end of the socialist regime in Russia?
3. At the beginning of the 20th century, Russian thought was the first to embrace existentialism as a coherent set of new philosophical ideas. What is existentialism and why do you think that Dostoyevsky's novel *Notes from the Underground* would be regarded as an example of an existential novel?

Reading

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