

No More Godmen: Alexandre Kojève, Atheism, and Vladimir Solov'ev

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For all is like an ocean, all flows and converges; touch in one place and at the other end of the world it gives way.

—Elder Zosima in *Brothers Karamazov*

The philosophy of Alexandre Kojève looms large over the history of twentieth-century thought. His seminars on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, delivered from 1933 until 1939 at the École pratique des hautes études (EPHE) in Paris reinvigorated interest in the German thinker and effectively defined the parameters of philosophical debate for a generation of post-war intellectuals. The many attendees to Kojève's seminars (among others, Jacques Lacan, André Breton, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Georges Bataille) were greatly affected by his eclectic reading of the *Phenomenology* and adopted his terminology directly into their own work. His anthropological interpretation of Hegel, in which a nascent subject battles with and is instantiated by its "other," became foundational even for those who did not directly attend the seminars—in particular such philosophers as Simon de Beauvoir, Frantz Fanon, and (much later) Judith Butler, all of whom relied on Kojève in articulating their own philosophies of difference, desire, and identity.¹ By the time of his death in 1968, Kojève's reading of Hegel had so firmly established itself within continental philosophy that his critics were forced to begrudgingly acknowledge his influence in order to overcome it: Martin Heidegger, in a letter written to Hannah Arendt in 1967, reluctantly admitted that Kojève's "rare passion for thinking" had meant even the abandonment of his thought was "itself an idea."²

Although Alexandre Kojève is now well-enshrined in this history of continental philosophy, his relationship to the Russian tradition only began

1. Beauvoir's relationship to Kojève, and the influence of his Hegelianism on French feminism, is treated by Eva Lundgren-Gothlin in *Sex and Existence: Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex* (Middleton, CT, 1996). Ethan Kleinberg has written on Kojève's philosophy of identity and Fanon's treatment of race and coloniality in "Kojève and Fanon: The Desire for Recognition and the Fact of Blackness," in Tyler Stovall and Georges Van Den Abbeele, eds., *French Civilization and its Discontents: Nationalism, Colonialism, Race* (Lanham, MD, 2003), 115–28. Judith Butler wrote extensively on Kojève, French Hegelianism, and its theory of alterity in their PhD dissertation, which was then published as *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York, 2012).

2. Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger, *Letters 1925–1975* (Orlando, FL, 2004), 133. Although Heidegger out of necessity acknowledged Kojève's influence, the German philosopher was highly dismissive of Kojève's reading of his own *Being and Time*, viewing it, like many critics of Kojève, as too anthropological in its approach.

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to attract attention at the end of the century.³ In 2001, the philosopher's collected papers were donated to the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) and revealed an extensive relationship with émigré communities in Germany and France, including a close friendship with Lev Karsavin, praise for his work from Fedor Stepun, frequent evenings spent at the house of Nikolai Berdiaev, and a personal invitation from Georges Florovsky to join the Russian Philosophical Society in Paris.⁴ In his early years, just prior to the acclaim garnered by his seminars on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Kojève enjoyed a relatively active link to Russian philosophy and was still tethered to his home tradition through networks in diaspora.

Ongoing debates within this Russian émigré community offered an initial entry point for Kojève as a philosopher. Born in Moscow in 1902 as Aleksandr Kozhevnikov, Kojève had emigrated from Russia to Germany in 1920 in order to study philosophy at the University of Heidelberg. While studying under Karl Jaspers, he wrote his dissertation on Vladimir Solov'ev, presenting an overview of the religious thinker and his significance to Russian thought. Entitled "Vladimir Solov'ev's Philosophy of History," the dissertation was submitted in 1926 and later adapted into two articles, one in German in 1930 and another in French in 1934–35—the publication of the latter ultimately accredited him to teach his influential seminars at the EPHE. These early writings illustrate in particular Kojève's keen interest in Solov'ev's Sophia as an anthropological approach to the philosophy of history.

Given that, in general, Kojève published very little in his lifetime, it is only through posthumously released works that one can follow more accurately his evolution as a philosopher. The manuscript *Atheism*, written in Russian in 1930 but only published for the first time in French in 1998, is a complicated work in this regard.⁵ *Atheism* illustrates the philosopher's early engagement with Russian thought, yet it also outlines a secularization of the theandric concepts germane to the national tradition, in particular the theory of *bogochelovechestvo* or godmanhood that, after the revolution, survived and even flourished within diasporic circles. Together with his university research, these early works suggest that Kojève's engagement with Russian philosophy was more thorough than previously considered. They

3. Alexei Rutkevich first posed the question of Kojève's relationship to Russian intellectual history in "Alexandre Kojève, russkii filosof," *Chelovek* 5 (1997): 90–92. He has since returned regularly to Kojève's work. Vadim Rossman discussed Kojève, from the perspective of his translation of Russian thought into western continental philosophy, in "Okno v Evropu dlia russkoi idei," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, Dec. 9 (1998): 16. See also Rossman, "Posle filosofii: Kozhev, 'konets istorii' i russkaia mysl,'" *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 5 (1999): 21–26. Alexander Etkind addressed the general connections between Kojève, Solov'ev, and historicism within French theory in "Novyi istorizm, russkaia versia," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 47, no. 1 (2001): 8. Boris Groys also regularly examines Kojève in a Russian context, first in "Filosof posle kontsa istorii," *Uskol' zaiushchii kontekst. Russkaia filosofia v postsovetских usloviakh. Materialy konferentsii (Bremen, 25–27 iunია 1998 g.)* (Moscow, 2002): 147–60. Lastly, the first book-length manuscript devoted to Kojève and Russian philosophy is Jeff Love's *The Black Circle* (New York, 2018).

4. Bibliothèque nationale de France (NAF), Paris 28320, Fonds Alexandre Kojève. Kojève eventually met his life-partner, Nina Ivanoff, through Karsavin. Ivanoff was a close friend of Karsavin's youngest daughter.

5. Alexandre Kojève, *L'Athéisme* (Paris, 1998). The original Russian version of the manuscript was edited by Alexei Rutkevich and published in Aleksandr Kozhev, *Ateizm i drugie raboty* (Moscow, 2007).

also illustrate, moreover, the extent to which his maturation as a philosopher required parting ways with the theological concerns of his Russian peers: ultimately, his eventual break from the Russian tradition paralleled his own belief in a fundamental distinction between theist and atheist approaches to the practice of philosophy.

Since both *Atheism* and his work on Solov'ev focus on philosophies of history, a growing issue among scholars has become the question of continuity and rupture between a younger Kojève and his later influential reading of history, its conclusion, and human realization in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. Furthermore, what might this mean for the relationship between Kojève's thought and the rich tradition of Russian religious philosophy that emerged in the wake of Solov'ev and survived in émigré circles abroad? To pose the question more broadly, how might one read Kojève through and against Russian thought?

The Early Years

From an early age, Kojève had professed an interest in eastern philosophy: his youth in Moscow was spent within fin-de-siècle circles fascinated by occult exoticism, and the nascent philosopher had kept a journal on his train ride west that already included scattered reflections on Buddha and the importance of negation and “non-being” within non-western traditions.⁶ Upon his arrival to Heidelberg, Kojève had initially set out to study Indology, Tibetan Buddhism, and the Sanskrit and Chinese languages, alongside more expected coursework in the western philosophical canon.⁷ Ironically, however, this fascination with the east gradually shifted toward a study of Russia: he soon dropped eastern studies and chose instead to write his master's dissertation on the philosophy of Solov'ev. Biographer Marco Filoni attributes this shift in part to Kojève's friendship with Nicolai von Bubnoff, a fellow émigré who taught Russian philosophy and literature at the university. Although not his dissertation director, von Bubnoff encouraged Kojève's interest in the Russian religious tradition and even guided his reading habits.⁸ While Kojève was an avid reader within his native literature even before the university (other

6. The diary entry on Buddha is quoted in Marco Filoni, *Le philosophe du dimanche: La vie et la pensée d'Alexandre Kojève*, trans. Gérald Larché (Paris, 2010), 76–85. The diary has been published in full as Alexandre Kojève, *Tagebuch eines Philosophen*, trans. Simon Missal (Berlin, 2015).

7. According to Rutkevich, Kojève initially hoped to study eastern studies (*vostokovedenie*) at Moscow State University but was prevented by new Soviet rules barring upper class families such as his from enrolling. See A. M. Rutkevich, “Aleksandr Kozhev v Germanii,” in B.I. Pruzhinin and T.G. Shchedrina, eds., *Toposy filosofii Natalii Avtonomovoi. K iubileiu* (Moscow, 2015), 382. A more thorough overview of Kojève's coursework at Heidelberg can be found in Filoni, *Le philosophe du dimanche*, 144.

8. *Ibid.*, 159–60. Von Bubnoff wrote to Kojève in 1926, while the latter was in Berlin, asking him to bring back several Russian philosophical texts to Heidelberg. Preserved in Kojève's collected papers, the letter requests in particular: any works by Solov'ev; Nikolai Berdiaev's *Meaning of the Creative Act* (1916); Ivan Il'in's *Hegel's Philosophy as a Doctrine of the Concreteness of God and Man* (1918); and *East, West, and the Russian Idea* (1922), *Noctes petropolitanae* (1922), and *Philosophy of History* (1923), all by Karsavin.

diary entries include passing reflections on Fedor Dostoevskii, Lev Tolstoi, and Dmitrii Merezhkovskii), the shift toward Solov'ev reflects the general significance and popularity the religious philosopher enjoyed within émigré circles. After Lenin's expulsion of ideologically problematic intellectuals on the Philosophers' Steamships in 1922, an entire generation of Russian religious philosophers working in the tradition of Solov'ev had been established in western Europe, where they dominated émigré journals and debates.⁹ Their publications and circles were the first to receive Kojève as he began his career as a philosopher.

Kojève thus began his dissertation work on Solov'ev in 1924, gathering materials from émigré libraries in western Europe, but while the research would yield several articles, it nevertheless remains unclear if he ever formally finished at Heidelberg and received his diploma.¹⁰ A version of his dissertation, "Vladimir Solov'ev's Religious Philosophy," was made available by the university in 1926, yet in a letter written in 1929 to his uncle, the painter Vasilii Kandinskii, Kojève claimed that he lacked the money to print his dissertation.¹¹ This lack of a published dissertation would prove a major problem for Kojève when he relocated to Paris in 1926, as he would need proof of his degree to find work at a university. In 1930, Kojève managed to publish a heavily edited version of his dissertation, entitled "Vladimir Solov'ev's Philosophy of History" in *Der russische Gedanke*, and the editor of the journal, Boris Jakowenko, was particularly enthusiastic about the work.¹² In order to receive French accreditation, however, Kojève initially dropped his study of Solov'ev and dramatically changed course, applying for a degree at the Sorbonne in theoretical physics. His proposed plan of study in physics was nevertheless firmly and quickly rejected, effectively ending his brief attempt as a philosopher of science and forcing him to return once more to Solov'ev.

This time, he sought the help of friend and colleague Alexandre Koyré—born in Taganrog, Koyré had met Kojève within Berlin émigré circles while the latter was studying at Heidelberg. Their friendship at first seemed unlikely, as at the time Kojève was seducing Koyré's sister-in-law, Cécile Shoutak, away from Koyré's brother. Despite the initial scandal of the affair, Koyré came to

9. For more on the "Philosophers' Ships," see Lesley Chamberlain, *Lenin's Private War: The Voyage of the Philosophy Steamer and the Exile of the Intelligentsia* (New York, 2006). An excellent overview of the significance of Russian religious philosophy within diaspora, and in particular in France, can be found in Antoine Arjakovsky, *The Way: Religious Thinkers of the Russian Emigration in Paris and Their Journal, 1925–1940*, trans. Jerry Ryan (Notre Dame, 2013).

10. In 1924–25, Kojève wrote to Nikolai Rubakin, a well-known Russian bibliographer and writer then based in Lausanne, in order to request any works he might have on Solov'ev.

11. For his university dissertation, see Alexander Koschewnikoff, "Die Religioese Philosophie Wladimir Solowjews" (PhD diss., Heidelberg Universität, 1926). For the exchange between Kojève and Kandinskii, see Vasilii Kandinskii, *Correspondences avec Zervos et Kojève* (Paris, 1992), 147.

12. Alexander Koschewnikoff, "Die Geschichtsphilosophie Wladimir Solowjews," *Der russische Gedanke: Internationale Zeitschrift für russische Philosophie, Literaturwissenschaft und Kunst* 1, no. 3 (1930): 305–24.

respect and even admire the younger Kojève.¹³ Koyré himself had already successfully made the transition from the Russian diaspora into French intellectual life. Having studied under Edmund Husserl at Göttingen, Koyré was a well-respected figure who played a major role in first introducing phenomenology to a French audience. He was therefore in an excellent position to advise Kojève on his own nascent career. With help from Koyré, who heavily edited the work, Kojève presented his writings on Solov'ev to the EPHE and was conferred a diploma that would permit him to teach at the institution. As a conclusion to his formal engagement with the Russian religious philosopher, Kojève published this edited form of his dissertation research as the article "The Religious Metaphysics of Vladimir Solov'ev," appearing in two installments in 1934 and 1935 in the journal *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses*.¹⁴ By then, he had already begun to lecture on Hegel at the EPHE, where in 1933 he replaced Koyré, who had departed for a visiting teaching position in Cairo. Thus, Kojève's final years of studying Russian philosophy and Solov'ev were in fact what enabled him to first begin his famous reading of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

These early writings on Solov'ev transformed across the various published versions of Kojève's graduate work. In his dissertation and German article, he offers a general overview of Solov'ev's philosophy, whereas his final French work, in focusing more narrowly on the doctrine of Sophia and the Absolute, sheds light on what arguably most drew Kojève to the religious philosopher. In "The Religious Metaphysics of Vladimir Solov'ev," Kojève writes that theandry, the Christian understanding of Jesus Christ as both divine and human, is the guiding principle of Solov'ev's metaphysical theology.¹⁵ He focuses his reading of Solov'ev on *Critique of Abstract Principles* (1880), in which Solov'ev outlined two definitions of the Absolute: the Absolute is both "detached from anything, liberated, and secondly finite, completed, and all-encompassing."¹⁶ These definitions are, initially, contradictory: Solov'ev describes the first Absolute as an eternal, total unity (*vseedinstvo* or, in Kojève's translation, "unitotality") of all things that is nevertheless nothing in particular, whereas the second Absolute is defined as every particular thing in the multifaceted, physical world (*materia prima*).¹⁷

The contradiction is resolved, however, in an evolving relationship between the two Absolutes. This second Absolute serves as the first's "other" and content: the total unity of the first Absolute, everything but nothing in particular, can only be defined by the aggregate of material content from the second, which is collectively all particular things. The second Absolute,

13. This affair is recounted in Filoni, *Le philosophe du dimanche*, 189–90. Kojève eventually married Shoutak in Paris in 1927, although they would divorce in 1929.

14. Alexandre Kojevnikoff, "La métaphysique religieuse de Vladimir Soloviev," *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 14, no. 6 (1934): 534–54, and 15, no. 1–2 (1935): 110–52.

15. Kojevnikoff, "La métaphysique religieuse," 15, no. 1–2 (1935): 111.

16. V. S. Solov'ev, *Kritika otvlechennykh nachal, Sochineniia Vladimira Solov'eva*, vol. 14 (Moscow, 1880), 327.

17. *Ibid.*, 328.

coined by Solov'ev as the "becoming Absolute" [*absolutnoe stanoviashcheesia*] is gradually assembled, across history, into the unitotality of the first:

in order for the Absolute to be as such, it requires an Other, non-Absolute: the totality, in order to be everything, requires the many, the absolute spirit requires for its reality matter, and the supernatural being of God requires nature for its holy manifestation. True being in order to truly be being, that is total unity or absolute, should be the unity of itself and its other.¹⁸

Solov'ev identifies the second, "becoming" Absolute as the Christian theandric principle of an ideal humanity, as it gradually assembles and transforms into the divine. Humankind is the material content of the divine, and godmanhood is the process whereby humankind collectively and freely enters into union with God, with the unitotality of the first Absolute. In short: history is the process of humanity modeling itself after the divine.

This convergence of human and divine worlds is exemplified in Jesus Christ, whose incarnation symbolizes the union of these two Absolutes. In his critique of Solov'ev, however, Kojève highlights a major contradiction within this definition of godmanhood: namely, in his definition of Sophia, or the personified embodiment of divine wisdom. Solov'ev had coined Sophia relatively late in the development of his philosophy of theandry, as an attempt to understand this union of collective humanity and Absolutes as a mystical form of love.¹⁹ He defined Sophia as humankind's eternal unity with God, an erotic embrace of humanity with divinity, yet he simultaneously claimed that the material, human world was "fallen Sophia separated from God."²⁰ Kojève objected: how can Sophia be both eternal and fallen? In other words, how is humanity both eternally linked to God and yet striving to reconnect with Him? Kojève argued that this contradiction reflects Solov'ev's fundamental inability to understand historicism and temporality in his doctrine of godmanhood and the Absolute. If the first (divine) Absolute must by its nature be atemporal, the second (human or becoming) Absolute by its nature unites humanity to the divine *across time*: "the one contradicts the other."²¹

Furthermore, if Jesus Christ is the personification of Sophia, as the Christian convergence of the human and divine, why did his appearance on earth not inaugurate the unification between the two Absolutes, as Solov'ev

18. *Ibid.*, 334. As Kojève acknowledges, rather dismissively, Solov'ev essentially repeats verbatim a formulation of "the Absolute and its other" made earlier by Friedrich Schelling, who had termed it the Absolute and its Ground. For more, see Koschewnikoff, "Die Geschichtsphilosophie Wladimir Solowjews," 305–6.

19. Solov'ev's theory of Sophia was also famously based on as a prophetic vision he experienced of the divine feminine while researching in the British Museum in London. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt provides an excellent overview of Solov'ev and his development of Sophia in "Who is Sophia and Why is She Writing in My Manuscript? Vladimir Solov'ev and the Channeling of Divine Wisdom," *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies*. Special Double Issue: The Icon and the Bridge: Sophia in Orthodox Culture 59, no. 3–4 (2007): 213–44. One must also remark on the problematic origin of the concept, in light of its reified notions of femininity, Solov'ev's orientalist fascination with ancient Egypt and the Middle East, and his rather retrograde views on Islam, Asian societies, and an alleged "eastern threat."

20. *Ibid.*, 126.

21. *Ibid.*, 127.

had outlined in his cosmogeny? According to Kojève, for Solov'ev the revelation of Christ was an "absolutely perfected human yet nevertheless, as a real individual, separated from the rest of the human and material universe."²² Christ had not fully reconciled humanity to the divine because his appearance was an individual act, whereas humanity must *universally* and collectively follow in the steps taken individually by Christ as some kind of theandric blueprint.

Kojève nevertheless critiqued Solov'ev for his inability to reconcile Christ as both a manifestation of these united forms of the Absolute and a historical figure demarcating an evolving relationship between humanity and the divine. Christ is a philosophical problem because what he represents is both universal and historical in nature. This contradiction, moreover, recalled Solov'ev's problem of an Absolute that is simultaneously all particular things, and nothing in particular. For Kojève, the solution would be an atheistic approach to the theological problem, yet, curiously enough, he suggests that Solov'ev himself began to realize this contradiction in his later career, even addressing it in his final publication, *Three Conversations on War, Progress, and the End of History* (1899).

There, Solov'ev recounts the story of the anti-Christ, a figure who emerges in the twenty-first century and, while he performs good deeds and helps to bring peace, nevertheless is deceitful in his relationship to the Divine. The anti-Christ accentuates the difficulties in historicizing a Christian philosophy of godmanhood, as the anti-Christ sees himself as greater than Christ due to his final position at the end of history: "Christ came before me. I come second. But what, in order of time, appears later is, in its essence, the first. I come last, at the end of history, and for the very reason that I am the complete, final savior of the world. Christ is my precursor. His mission was to precede and prepare for my coming."²³ If the significance of Christ is in his synthesis of the human and divine, the emergence of a great figure after Christ could subvert the historical underpinnings of godmanhood.

Although the anti-Christ offers universal peace, his rise is resisted by a small number of Christian sects, who identify self-aggrandizement in his efforts. Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches unite and insist that the anti-Christ submit to the authority of Christ, and that his arrival is not the end of history, for Christ has not yet returned. When he refuses, they overthrow the anti-Christ and usher in the second coming of Christ, which ends history. Kojève interpreted this last work by Solov'ev as the most pessimistic and secular version of his theory of godmanhood, where history does not lead to the union of the two Absolutes previously outlined in his metaphysics. Instead, Solov'ev openly scrutinizes the teleological implications of his own philosophy:

History for Solov'ev is now no longer the gradual reconstitution of godmanhood and the return of fallen Sophia to God, but rather a perpetual battle of the principle of evil with that of good, a battle that, though it ends with the

22. Ibid., 144.

23. V. S. Solov'ev, "Tri razgovora o voine, progresse i kontse vseмирnoi istorii," in *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1988), 2:741.

victory of the latter, at the same time has as a consequence the annihilation of a large part of the empirical world: the kingdom of God lies on the other side of history that itself is abandoned to the dominion of evil. It could be that Solov'ev from this point of view is moving towards a specific essence of the Historical.²⁴

This specific essence of the historical could never be fully articulated by Solov'ev, who died several months after the text's publication. Nevertheless, Kojève strongly suggests that Solov'ev's next step would have been a more thorough secularization of this theory of Sophia, one that would help resolve its inherent contradictions, and he offers one possible interpretation of this secularization in his manuscript *Atheism*.

A New Atheism after Solov'ev

The critique made by Kojève in his works on Solov'ev foreshadows a distinction crucial to understanding his later seminars on Hegel. There, describing the historical transition made from a Christian (theological) worldview to a philosophical (atheist) one, Kojève will stress the significance of Hegel's inversion of Christian doctrine: "For the Christian, God becomes Man. Hegel interprets this as: Man becomes God at the end of his history evolution, or, more precisely, he is God by *becoming* him in the totality of this evolution—'Anthropotheism.'"²⁵ In order to overcome Solov'ev's problem of the Absolute, Kojève argues (through Hegel) that the historical process reveals to humanity that its vision of the Absolute, its other, was in fact itself all along: "the entire evolution of the Christian World is nothing other than a march toward an atheist awareness of the essential finitude of human existence. As such, it is only by 'eliminating' Christian *theology* that Man ceases to be a Slave and *realizes* the very idea of Liberty brought about—yet remaining abstract or idealist—by Christianity."²⁶ Humanity's merging with the divine, in other words, is actually the historical realization of one's own finite wisdom.

While these ideas are already latent in his critique of Solov'ev, they emerge fully in *Atheism*. Having finished the text in 1931, Kojève was conscious of its incompleteness, remarking in a footnote: "everything that I write here is merely a sketch of my philosophy, and therefore neither is definitive nor should it be published."²⁷ The manuscript thus remained unknown until 1998, when a French translation was published by Gallimard.²⁸ When examined in light of his work on Solov'ev, *Atheism* illustrates Kojève's incorporation of Solov'ev's ideas on godmanhood just as he eschews their theological underpinnings.

24. Koschewnikoff, "Die Geschichtesphilosophie Wladimir Solowjews," 306.

25. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel: Leçons sur la Phénoménologie de l'Esprit, professées de 1933 à 1939 à l'École des Hautes Études, réunies et publiées par Raymond Queneau* (Paris, 1947), 57.

26. *Ibid.*, 214.

27. Kozhev, *Ateizm*, 486.

28. Alexandre Kojève, *L'Athéisme* (Paris, 1998). Love has recently translated the text into English for the first time. See Alexandre Kojève, *Atheism*, trans. Jeff Love (New York, 2018).

At the heart of *Atheism* is the relationship between self and world, and the role that religion plays in offering, initially to both atheist and theist, the possibility of connection with another being. Subjectivity, Kojève argued, begins by realizing that things exist other than oneself: each person understands themselves in relationship to what is *not* themselves. Kojève depicts God therefore as the “ultimate Other,” a being so removed that it defies any possible relationship with humanity. Unlike other objects in the world, such as a chair or horse, God is distinguished by our inability to have any physical interaction with Him: “Objectively this means that God is something that differs radically from any other thing that one could say is this or that.”²⁹ Kojève consequently defines three categories of things: oneself (which has definable attributes), things which are not the self but definable (“the world”), and God, which is not oneself and not definable. God is a thing completely without attributes, in contrast to every other “qualified something.” One cannot, moreover, have multiple non-qualified things, as it would be impossible to distinguish them from one another.³⁰

In Kojève’s first step toward defining atheism, the atheist denies the existence of this ultimate, undefinable Other:

for the atheist, God is not something. It is nothingness, and between myself and God there cannot be a relation, nor anything in common, since I know to a certain extent that I exist (I am a something), whereas God simply does not exist. It is clearly impossible to say what is this nothingness that God “is,” since it does not exist. Not only can one not say anything about it, but moreover one has nothing to say. The negation of God by the atheist must be understood radically and “simply”: in other words, for the atheist there is no God.³¹

The atheist’s problem, Kojève finds, is that in order to disavow God, the atheist must necessarily acknowledge the non-existence of God so as to deny it. He illustrates this problem with an analogy of an atheist stone: a stone does not *know* whether God exists, it is merely a stone without knowledge of God, whereas the atheist must “know” that God does not exist.³² Both the atheist and the theist are thus originally presented with a “path toward God,” a potential relationship with the ultimate Other. The atheist, however, in actively denying the existence of God, paradoxically recognizes the existence of the thing that they seek to deny. Kojève defines this inevitable “path toward God” as religion, and the atheist’s path to nowhere as the “atheist religion.”

29. Kojève, *Ateizm*, 55. Kojève systematically moves through various mystical relationships with the divine, explaining how their attempts to imagine a physical interaction between humankind and the divine are philosophically inconsistent. He is most generous toward apophatic theological traditions, which are the closest to atheism while still understanding God as “something” even while they negate Him. He curiously also mentions the *khlysty* religious sect as unique in their relationship to the Divine, where according to Kojève God is not an unqualifiable Other but rather internalized into their conceptions of themselves. See his note in *Ateizm*, *ibid.*, 431.

30. *Ibid.*, 60. Kojève uses this point to argue against polytheism.

31. *Ibid.*, 56–57.

32. *Ibid.*, 430.

The atheist thus does not believe in non-qualifiable things (God) but instead only knows things with defined attributes: “the atheist believes ‘neither in God nor the devil,’ he only knows qualifiable things, the me and the not-me, a person (oneself) in the world, and nothing else. Outside of this, there is only nothingness.”³³ From this disbelief, the atheist creates an immanent community with other, qualifiable things in the world:

These other things are other people. In seeing outside of myself other people, I cease to perceive the world as something completely foreign to me, as something other, radically different from this something that I myself am. I can fear an “empty” world, that is, it could seem to me “foreign,” but the fear passes (or becomes something else, dread without object transforms into concrete fear before an enemy, etc.) as soon as I recognize another person: I see immediately that my fear is in vain, that the world is not as strange to me as it seemed before. . . It is rather in seeing something incontestably familiar outside of myself that I understand that this “outside of myself” cannot be completely foreign to me.³⁴

Kojève stresses collectivity in the homogeneity of things in the world: because they are all definable, it effectively establishes a rapport between self and other: “despite the diversity of forms in which he and I are given. . . in seeing another person, I feel a sense of community with him. . . given in the interaction between the world and person.”³⁵

Atheism clearly develops Kojève's earlier speculation on Solov'ev's anti-Christ, where the religious philosopher began to view humanity as unable to “reach” the divine and inaugurate the spiritual on earth. It also reorients Solov'ev's contradiction of two Absolutes: the many qualifiable things of the world (the second Absolute) are irreconcilable with the unqualifiable thing known as God (the first Absolute). While Solov'ev initially envisioned godmanhood and Sophia as a unification of God and humanity, at the end of his life he realized, so Kojève claims, that such a reconciliation was impossible. The anti-Christ unites the people of the world, but it is the result of refusing God rather than having any transcendental relationship with the divine. The “end of history” was merely the unification of the material world on Earth, as the path toward reunification with the divine was closed.

It is significant for Kojève that nothingness (*nichto* or *le néant*) and negation play the major role in adhering the material world together into a community. Kojève praises the freedom Solov'ev, and by extension Christ, gave humanity to choose between God or nothingness: “[humanity] is free to reduce itself to nothingness in declaring itself against God.”³⁶ The centrality of nothingness to human experience resurfaces in *Atheism*, where the atheist chooses nothingness over God and accepts that community is formed in the shadow of this emptiness. Part of this interest in non-being may reflect Kojève's earlier, admittedly orientalist interest in Buddhist and South Asian

33. *Ibid.*, 61.

34. *Ibid.*, 73–74.

35. *Ibid.*, 74.

36. Kojevnikoff, “La métaphysique religieuse de Vladimir Soloviev,” *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 15, no. 2 (1935), 118.

traditions, yet it also clearly reflects the then popularity of Heidegger, whose unique terminology Kojève deploys and cites throughout.³⁷ Heidegger's influence is furthermore in an emphasis on death as the definitive form of non-being that shapes human experience: by denying the existence of God, the atheist's "path toward God" becomes instead a path toward one's own mortality as a reminder of human nothingness: "nothing is therefore given to the atheist outside of the world, but what does it mean that 'nothing is given?'"³⁸ Death is the atheist's only access to being "outside of the world" and is, in Kojève's words, an *active* nothingness. The remarks are nearly verbatim those of Heidegger who a few years prior had similarly written on death as "the possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be-there."³⁹

Kojève's development of a *negative* anthropology, in which humanity is a freely negating agent that embraces mortal finitude, found echo decades later in structuralist and post-structuralist proclamations of "the death of man" or the "death of the subject." This next generation of thinkers, including many of Kojève's own students, relied on his anthropology to critique previous claims for an integral human subject at the center of philosophical inquiry.⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, for example, clearly refers to Kojève in *The Order of Things* (1966), where he traces the disintegration of a stable, discursive subject at the center of modern human sciences: "in our day. . . it is not so much the absence or the death of God that is affirmed as the end of man."⁴¹ In critiquing humanist trends in Marxist philosophy, Louis Althusser likewise credited Kojève with discovering the fundamental negativity at the heart of subjectivity, even if he disagreed with Kojève's conclusions.⁴² By the end of the Second World War, Kojève's treatment of being as an act of negation had been effectively subsumed into French philosophical discourse. Looking back, Jacques Derrida referred to the period as a time of an "apocalyptic tone in philosophy" and delineated its terminologies and canon: "end of History, end of Man, end of Philosophy, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger, with their Kojevian codicil and the codicils of Kojève himself."⁴³

Given Kojève's insistence that *Atheism* was an impressionistic attempt at a conceptual problem rather than a polished piece of writing, one should not

37. For a broader context of Kojève's engagement with Heidegger across his career, see Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger's Philosophy in France, 1927–1961* (Ithaca, 2005), as well as Dominique Pirotte, "Alexandre Kojève, lecteur de Heidegger," *Les Études philosophiques*, no. 2 (1993), 205–21.

38. Kojève, *Ateizm*, 108.

39. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, 2010), 241.

40. Stefanos Geroulanos has extensively outlined Kojève's contribution to anti-humanist philosophy in *An Atheism that is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (Stanford, 2010), 13–15.

41. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1994), 385.

42. "If man is a void in being who triumphs over being, then we need to determine the status of his unfortunate adversary." See Louis Althusser, "Man, That Night," in *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London, 1997), 174–75.

43. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York, 1994), 16.

exaggerate its importance within his philosophy. Nevertheless, as a transitional text, it allows us to identify both themes that shaped his initial development as a philosopher, as well as linkages between his work within the Russian diaspora and his later magnum opus: his seminars on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, held at the EPHE from 1933 to 1939. Indeed, the homogeneous community created by the atheist in *Atheism* parallels the anthropological project developed by Kojève in his reading of the *Phenomenology*. Kojève even stresses in the seminars the need to interpret Hegel, his philosophy of Absolute Spirit, and the end of history as an atheist realization of a theological project: “for Hegel, the real object of religious thought is Man himself: every *theology* is necessarily an *anthropology*. Spirit, the suprasensible and transcendent entity with regard to Nature, is in reality nothing other than the negating (that is, creative) Action realized by Man in the given World.”⁴⁴ Reading Kojève’s seminars through his early writings thus allows us to see one origin of his philosophy—namely, his engagement with, and ultimate renunciation of, the Russian tradition and Solov’ev’s godmanhood.

In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel traced the evolution of Absolute Spirit across time: history is the gradual realization of concrete knowledge, as it is embodied in philosophical reason and knowledge of the Absolute. In his seminars, Kojève infamously stressed the fourth chapter of the *Phenomenology*, the mediation of the dialectic of Lord and Bondsman. Two subjects, in order to be recognized as subjects, fight to the death so as to make one submit and agree to recognize the other. The Lord initially succeeds in forcing recognition (and labor) from the Bondsman, yet as such the Bondsman exerts a power over the Lord, by both controlling the Lord’s recognition and shaping the world through their labor.⁴⁵ By being willing to risk death for recognition, the dialectic of Lord and Bondsman once more illustrated to Kojève the centrality of non-being and nothingness in human subjectivity.⁴⁶

In analyzing the evolving relationship of Lord and Bondsman as it shifts and manifests in various historical socio-economic forms, Kojève thus reworked the *Phenomenology* into an anthropological project, in which humanity realizes its full potential as the subject and object of history: “but the Human, in creating History, reveals itself to itself by and through this creation. The successive revelation of the Human to itself by itself constitutes the *ideational* [idéel] universal History.”⁴⁷ The trajectory of Absolute Spirit is not one of pure reason but humanity itself, which attains true wisdom when it comes to understand its own capacity to make and realize history—when, in short, *all* of humanity is both Lord and Bondsman. Kojève argued that Hegel, in writing the *Phenomenology*, explicitly viewed the atheist realization of

44. Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, 311.

45. *Ibid.*, 65–67.

46. While I lack the space here to address fully the nuance of Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel, I provide a general account of Kojève’s seminars, his theory of desire as negation, and its relationship to the Russian philosophical tradition in “Kojève’s Gift: How a Russian Philosopher Brought an ‘Other’ Love to the West,” in *Slavic and East European Journal* 63, no. 4 (2019): 579–96.

47. Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, 116.

Christian ideals as necessary to this trajectory, and that it had been realized in the Napoleonic era through the formation of the bureaucratic legal state of the period:

the perfect Man, that is, completely and definitively satisfied with what he is, being the realization of the Christian ideal of Individuality—the revelation of this Man by Absolute Knowledge has the same content as Christian Theology, minus the notion of transcendence: one need only say of Man everything that the Christian says of his God in order to pass from absolute or Christian Theology into Hegel’s absolute philosophy or Science. And this transition is carried out thanks to Napoleon, as Hegel had illustrated.⁴⁸

The claim clearly parallels Solov’ev’s own description of the anti-Christ, the messiah of a final world order and embodiment of wisdom who ends bloody wars and revolutions.⁴⁹ For Kojève, in this end of history, humanity no longer pursues any new, historical actions, but instead witnesses the slow expansion of a bureaucratic and homogeneous state: “[the state] reunites all of humanity. . . and ‘annuls’ (*aufhebt*) in its being all ‘specific differences’: nations, social classes, families. . . This State no longer changes, because all its Citizens are ‘satisfied.’”⁵⁰

Kojève’s claim to an “end of history” was offensively Eurocentric in orientation: the philosopher viewed the independence of former colonies, and even the Soviet and Chinese revolutions, as mere “extensions in space of universal, revolutionary power brought about in France by Robespierre and Napoleon.”⁵¹ Subsequent historical struggles are reduced to footnotes to the development of a strong, European state. It should be noted, however, that some of Kojève’s interpreters were more generous than others in understanding this homogeneous state and its flattening of differences: Butler, for instance, refers to Kojève’s idea as “one that maintains a dialectical mediation of individuality and collectivity. In fact, collective life appears to gain its final measure and legitimation in proving capable of recognizing *individual* desires.”⁵² Regardless, the claim soon took on a wide array of political interpretations in Kojève’s wake, at home in both interpretations of class struggle in western

48. *Ibid.*, 313–14. Hegel had finished *The Phenomenology of Spirit* in Jena in 1806, just as Napoleon led his troops in the decisive battle near the Prussian city.

49. In this regard, Kojève mines a rich tradition within Russian culture of associating Napoleon with the anti-Christ. Michael Pesenson provides an excellent overview in “Napoleon Bonaparte and Apocalyptic Discourse in Early Nineteenth-Century Russia,” in *Russian Review* 65, no. 3 (2006): 373–92.

50. *Ibid.*, 117.

51. This is outlined in one of the most famous footnotes of the published seminar notes, added in later editions by Kojève. See *ibid.*, 510. Fredric Jameson, who criticizes Kojève for his underdeveloped argument for a final universal and homogeneous state, nevertheless makes the compelling point that Kojève’s view of a homogeneous state was a product of his time, in which the conditions of the interwar period heavily encouraged speculation on both teleology and strong statecraft among philosophers and politicians alike. See “Revolution and the ‘End of History,’” in *The Hegel Variations* (London, 2017), 96–115.

52. Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, 78.

Marxist traditions, and most infamously in Francis Fukuyama's work on the ascendancy of neoliberal democracies in the post-Soviet period.⁵³

The idea of a collective, homogeneous world at the end of history, however, had already been developed by Kojève in his earlier writings, and it is now clear that these speculations were developed out of a critique of Solov'ev's Sophia and the Russian eschatological tradition. Kojève in fact alludes directly to Sophia in the seminars, "Wisdom itself" that is embodied in the emergence of a Sage at the end of history, a figure who, rather than struggling in historic action, is now *fully satisfied* with knowledge of the world and "fully and perfectly self-aware."⁵⁴ Whereas Solov'ev's account of the anti-Christ, as one such Sage, was arguably pessimistic in tone, Kojève viewed this final figure positively: rather than struggle and create history, the Sage encapsulates humanity as a post-historical bureaucrat, effectively an administrator of the universal state.⁵⁵

While Kojève's adamant atheism might encourage us to look elsewhere for influences, it is nevertheless telling to compare Kojève's protracted investment in Sophiology with those of his Russian peers in diaspora. In 1935, during Kojève's seminars, Sergei Bulgakov is formally accused of heresy by the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) for advocating the theory of Sophia in his teachings at the St. Sergius Institute in Paris.⁵⁶ Bulgakov wrote on Sophia as the doctrine of *kenosis*, or emptying, whereby God diminishes Himself in order to allow for the creation of humanity and its ability to connect with the divine through spiritual love. In order for humanity to become God, it was necessary that God first *actively* empty Himself and seek mortality and humanity in the death of Jesus Christ: "Sophia—antinomically—condescends itself in the kenosis of the Son of God who descends from heaven to earth, in the self-diminishing of Christ. . . . In a way which is incomprehensible to man, divine nature diminished itself so far as to *allow* the death of human

53. Fukuyama relied almost exclusively on Kojève's Hegel seminars to describe the inevitable spread of liberalism after the Cold War, although he has since denounced his claims. See *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1992).

54. *Ibid.*, 317. Comparing Kojève's theory of wisdom to Sophiology, Boris Grois describes history for Kojève as desire itself, and the end of history as "posthistorical because it is post-coital." See his *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, trans. David Fernbach (London, 2012), 158.

55. Rossman succinctly describes Kojève's relation to the Russian Sophiological tradition as follows: "[i]n a sense, with his reflection on the end of history, [Kojève] continues the tradition of Russian historiosophy, in particular the apocalyptic tradition in Russian literature of the fin-de-siècle (Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, Sergei Nilus, Solov'ev, Nikolai Fedorov). In particular, his work resonates greatly with these thinkers' premonition of the arrival of a new type of human: the future boor (*griadushchii kham*). There is undoubtedly a link between his work and [Konstantin] Leont'ev's idea of a 'full, bourgeois Europe,' which lost the ferocity of Byzantine negativity, as well as with Vladimir Solov'ev's conception of the apocalypse in *Three Conversations*." See Rossman, "Posle filosofii: Kozhev, 'konets istorii' i russkaia mysl'."

56. Bulgakov's overemphasis on Sophia was thought to undermine the primacy of the Holy Trinity (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) as hypostases within Orthodox theology. According to his accusers, Bulgakov sought to envision Sophia as a fourth hypostasis.

nature, uniting itself with it in an indivisible manner.”⁵⁷ Thus, much like in Kojève’s *Atheism*, by embracing death and mortality, Bulgakov’s Sophia unified and established a spiritual community on earth.⁵⁸ While no formal correspondence or direct influence connects Kojève to Bulgakov, we do know that Kojève frequented Russian émigré circles that included Bulgakov, and certainly the debates surrounding Sophiology within the Russian community in Paris must have tempered Kojève’s work as he delivered his seminars several arrondissements over.

In fact, the popularity of Solov’ev’s theandry was so strong in Paris that even Berdiaev, in general loathe to ascribe himself to the insular world of émigré circles, described it in his memoirs as one of the Russian intelligentsia’s greatest contributions to the interwar intellectual milieu:

With what Russian thoughts did I arrive in the west? I think that above all I brought an eschatological feeling for the fate of history. . . I brought with me awareness of the crisis of historical Christianity. I brought awareness of the conflict of personality and world harmony, individual and general, unsolvable within the limits of history. . . I brought with me an idiosyncratic Russian anarchism based in religion, the rejection by religious thought of both the principal of authority and the supreme value of the state. I also consider the understanding of Christianity as the religion of godmanhood to be Russian. To this one could add the anthropology of godmanhood.⁵⁹

The 1920s and 30s witnessed an explosive interest in the use of theology within philosophy to address questions of humanity, history, political ideology, and nationhood—while not overtly religious in nature, political theorists and philosophers alike regularly cited theological doctrines in their work, all while “pushing under the rug religious problems and questions.”⁶⁰ This trend was in part the result of an interwar influx of east European intellectuals—including Kojève and his mentor Koyré—into French academic institutions, where by bringing with them new problematics and terminologies they uprooted base assumptions in the practice of philosophy.

57. Lilianna Kiejzik, “Sergei Bulgakov’s Sophiology of Death,” *Studies in East European Thought*, Special issue: Polish Studies in Russian Religious Philosophy 62, no. 1 (March 2010): 60.

58. One might also think of Bulgakov’s vision of a “sophic economy” (*sofinost’ khoziaistva*), where man’s ability to partake of Sophia permits his labor to overcome “the division of subject and object, for it posits the fundamentally *active* nature of their relationship. . . Labor becomes the bridge from the ‘I’ to the ‘not-I.’” See Catherine Evtuhov, *The Cross and the Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy* (Ithaca, 1997), 168.

59. N. Berdiaev, *Samopoznanie: Opyt filosofskoi avtobiografii* (Paris, 1949), 246–47.

60. See Geroulanos, *An Atheism*, 6. To offer two examples adjacent to Kojève, Carl Schmitt’s returned to Christian doctrines on divine right to reimagine juridical rule of law and political sovereignty in *Political Theology* (1922). Schmitt corresponded regularly with Kojève after the Second World War, when the latter’s affiliations with the Nazi party had rendered him a philosophical pariah. In a similar vein, Jacques Maritain, an influential French Catholic philosopher, played an advisory role in the post-war drafting of the United Nation’s declaration on human rights. Maritain was a close friend to Berdiaev and drew extensively from the Russian philosopher’s writings on Christian humanism.

Kojève claimed in his seminars that the Sage, having achieved satisfaction at the end of history, would ultimately become the bureaucrat, helping to administer the universal homogeneous state. Perhaps hoping to test his own theory, Kojève decided after the war to take his own shot at bureaucratic administration. In 1945, Robert Marjolin, who had attended the Hegel seminars and was then employed in the French Ministry of Economic Affairs, secured for Kojève a position as *chargé de mission* in his office. There Kojève would serve as an ad hoc adviser to diplomats and ministry figures until his death in 1968, notably earning the ears of both Charles de Gaulle and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing.⁶¹ Kojève's first assignment was to advocate for the Organization for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC), which had been founded following the Marshall plan in 1948 to supervise the distribution of American financial aid in Europe.⁶² The organization stipulated as a condition to economic aid the reduction of tariffs and other barriers to intra-European trade, easing the flow of transnational capital and later paving the way for a common customs union on the continent through the creation of the European Economic Community (EEC) with the signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1957. Thus, preliminary legal groundwork for a supranational European state is often, provocatively, ascribed to Kojève's initial philosophical vision of a universal and homogeneous state.⁶³

A Stalinist Solov'ev?: Mysteries of the Sophia Manuscript

Despite spending the last phase of his career in government, the exact nature of Kojève's political views remain controversial. Reflecting in his memoirs on a lifelong friendship with Kojève, Marjolin recalled numerous instances of Kojève's referring to himself as "Stalin's conscience," yet the moniker was often interpreted as merely another way to *épater les bourgeois*, a frequent habit and pleasure for the philosopher.⁶⁴ In the interwar years, Kojève had expressed clear sympathy for the USSR, and had written two opinion pieces for the Parisian émigré newspaper *Eurasia* (Evrasiia) in which he praised the Soviet Union for its creation of a "truly new culture and philosophy," predicting that only communist revolution could save Europe from stagnation, whereas an American ideological victory would only amount to Europe's enslavement to capital.⁶⁵ Later, after the liberation of France and into the Cold War era, rumors emerged claiming Kojève was a Soviet spy, yet the accusers

61. Robert Marjolin, *Le travail d'une vie. Mémoires 1911–1986* (Paris, 1986), 52–53.

62. The OEEC was renamed the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) in 1961.

63. For an example of the inflated claims of Kojève as a founder of the European Union, see Jacopo Barigazzi, "Russian Stalinist Who Invented Europe," *Politico*, March 22, 2017. Teresa Pullano offers a more nuanced analysis of Kojève's role in "Kojève et l'Europe comme Empire du Droit," *Philosophie* 135 (2017): 54–77.

64. Marjolin, *Le travail*, 57–58. In the first biography of Kojève, Dominique Auffret also alludes to Kojève's self-definition as a "Marxiste de droite." See *Alexandre Kojève. La philosophie, l'État, et la fin de l'Histoire* (Paris, 1990), 304.

65. Aleksandr Kozhevnikov, "Filosofia i V.K.P." and "K otsenke sovremennosti," in *Evrasiia: Ezhenedel'nik po voprosam kul'tury i politiki* (Paris, France), March 9, 1929 (7–8), and September 7, 1929 (1–2), respectively.

regularly arrived at conclusions through indirect means and insinuation.⁶⁶ In his more mature years, moreover, the philosopher seemed to have decidedly shifted toward an endorsement of both Charles de Gaulle and trans-Atlantism, viewing the “American way of life” as the supreme political configuration at the end of history rather than Stalinism or the Soviet Union.⁶⁷

According to Nina Ivanoff, Kojève’s longtime partner, in 1941 Kojève had visited the Soviet embassy in Paris and brought with him an unidentified manuscript. The manuscript was left at the embassy but, following a fire on June 22, 1941 that took most of the building’s paperwork with it, it was presumed to be lost forever. The circumstances surrounding the manuscript’s disappearance have fueled speculation as to its contents, as well as to why Kojève had brought it to the embassy in the first place. Thanks in part to the persistent claims surrounding Kojève and Soviet espionage, some have since claimed that the manuscript was a “letter to Stalin” written by Kojève in order to align his philosophical views, as expressed in the Hegel seminars, with Stalin’s politics.⁶⁸

To complicate matters, in the early 2000s, more than a half century later, a draft of an unpublished, Russian-language manuscript written by Kojève

66. In 1999, when Vasilii Mitrokhin, former archivist for the KGB who defected in 1991, published extensive material on various Soviet intelligence operations that had been conducted in the west, he included among the allegations the existence of a “white Russian” philosopher in France who served as a Soviet contact during the Cold War. Later, Raymond Nart, who was formerly employed in the French intelligence agency DST, claimed that that this philosopher was Kojève. He has most recently outlined his evidence in Raymond Nart, “Alexandre Kojevnikov dit Kojève: Un homme de l’ombre,” *Commentaire* 41 (2018), 224.

67. Kojève claimed that the United States had achieved the posthistorical, “final stage of communism” due to its, alleged, classless society and ability to satisfy consumer demand. See Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, 510–11. Rather than take any concrete position on Kojève’s views, however, I am more inclined to view the philosopher-turned-bureaucrat as intentionally nebulous in his politics over time, allowing his philosophical work to absorb the surrounding political climate rather than vice versa. While his Russian-language works clearly express sympathy for Stalinism, his works written while working in the French government shifted toward an endorsement of de Gaullism. Part of the uniqueness of Kojève’s influence in the twentieth century has been his ability to move effortlessly between various political movements (Eurasianists, Marxists, European integrationists, American neoconservatives), thereby highlighting unexpected communalities within said groups. This fluidity was actively cultivated by Kojève himself, and so to insist on a clean demarcation along the lines of political ideology does disservice to his body of work.

68. Hager Weslati makes this claim in “Kojève’s letter to Stalin,” *Radical Philosophy* 184 (2014): 7–18. Weslati alleges that the burned manuscript was effectively a Russian translation of Kojève’s Hegel seminars. She cites as evidence the memoirs of Evgenii Reis (known in French as Eugène Rubin), a Russian émigré photographer who briefly lived with Kojève in Paris and remained a friend to the philosopher. Reis describes how Kojève once told him he was writing a letter to Stalin that included “his analyses, prognoses, and some advice,” and that this was sent to the embassy along with the manuscript for his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. See Evgenii Reis, *Kozhevnikov, kto vy?* (Moscow, 2000), 69, 77. Rutkevich has remained deeply skeptical of the view that Kojève wrote any letter to Stalin and left it at the embassy. He explains his skepticism in “Rukopisi Aleksandra Kozheva 1939–1945 gg.,” in *Kozhev, Aleksandr. Sofiia—Filo-sofiia i fenomenologiia*, (Moscow, 2021), 4–39. See however note 70.

was found in the archive of Georges Bataille, Kojève's friend and former student. During the German occupation, Bataille had worked at the BnF and once described having preserved two manuscripts: a copy of Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" and an unnamed manuscript by Kojève. Is this newly discovered text a version of the manuscript that Kojève had left at the Soviet embassy? The draft in question is entitled *Sofia, Philo-Sophia*, and *Phenomenology*—consisting of approximately a thousand pages, it was in the process of being transcribed by Ivanoff but has been unfortunately delayed after her death, as researchers have struggled to read the inscrutable cursive in which Kojève had written it.⁶⁹

Although the exact relationship between this manuscript and the one burnt at the Soviet embassy will most likely never be resolved definitively, Kojève lists dates at the beginning of the various subsections on the *Sofia* manuscript, confirming that it was written 1940 to 1941, or right before his visit to the Soviets. The manuscript attempts furthermore to illustrate a connection between political and philosophical wisdom and expresses enthusiasm for Stalinism in this regard. Its engagement with wisdom as "Sophia" suggests that Kojève's earlier work on Solov'ev's philosophy may have exerted a longer influence on his work than previously understood, and that his previous secularization of Solov'ev remained at the forefront of his philosophy even as he sought to position himself once more within a Russian tradition by praising Soviet politics, now far removed from the religious philosophers of his earlier years.

The first half of the manuscript appears to follow the general conclusion of Kojève's Hegel seminars several years earlier, where Kojève speculated on the appearance of a Sage at the end of history. The opening chapter, entitled "absolute knowledge or 'wisdom' (*Sofia*), and philosophy as the pursuit of absolute knowledge," once more outlines wisdom as the condition of full knowability embodied in the Sage⁷⁰. Kojève repeats a similar claim made in the seminars that "philosophy strives not only to live and 'take advantage of life,' like every other living thing strives to do, but intends to live 'consciously.'" Philosophy, the pursuit of knowledge, began when "the 'first' person asked the first question about their life," yet philosophy will end "either when living beings stop asking *questions* about their lives or when *answers* are found for *all* possible questions of this kind."⁷¹ A Sage, Kojève claims, will be a human capable of answering any question posed to them concerning life or living activity: such a figure was called by the Greeks a wiseman (*Sofos*), "and his ability to answer questions is wisdom (*sofia*)."

69. Bibliothèque nationale de France (NAF), Paris 28320, Fonds Alexandre Kojève. Fragments of the manuscript were first published as "Prilozhenie: Aleksandr Kozhev, Vvedenie. Sofiiā—filosofiiā i fenomenologiiā (sostavl. A. M. Rutkevicha)," in *Istoriko-filosofskii ezhegodnik 2007* (Moscow, 2008): 276–324. Rambert Nicolas is currently preparing the first-time publication of the full text in French translation. I am grateful for his sharing of an early draft of the translation with me, as well as his general advice and camaraderie in our discussions of Kojève, the manuscript, and Russian philosophy in general. Quotations are made from his forthcoming translation.

70. Bibliothèque nationale de France (NAF), Paris 28320, Fonds Alexandre Kojève.

71. *Ibid.*

Just as in his work on Solov'ev, *Atheism*, and his Hegel seminars, Kojève likewise in the manuscript outlines the difference between wisdom as viewed by religious philosophers and wisdom as an atheist, anthropological ideal:

Describing philosophy as the ability to ask questions and give answers to them, we tacitly assumed, firstly, that the questions concern the life of man, and, secondly, that man himself poses them and answers them without any non-human help. Yet it actually seems that a part of those people one is accustomed, however falsely, to calling philosophers see things differently. The main questions for them concern not man (Anthropos) but rather that which they call "God" (Theos), and the answer is given in the final analysis not by man but by this very same "God." In other words, it is a question here of an opposition of philosophy in the proper sense of the word, that is, "discourse on man" (anthropo-logy) to this pseudo-philosophy which is correctly called "discourse on God" (theology).⁷²

Philosophers are thus those who believe in the ability of humanity to answer its own questions without any external assistance, for example, from God. Kojève clarifies this distinction with a mathematical analogy: there is almost certainly no one able to name the 100,000th decimal in the mathematical consonant π , yet *theoretically* one can calculate this number, due in part to advances in mathematics and human reason: "the truth of mathematics in general relies on this principle. . . it is precisely because humanity can respond in principle to *any* question, when always using the same means, that already supplied answers (and only those) can be true without having to presuppose the existence of any wisdom outside of humanity." The realization of this possibility in humanity, Kojève argues, was discovered in Judeo-Christian thought in its conception of revelation: "from the point of view of Christianity, the truth ('revealed' by Jesus) cannot appear before its given time, since God can only be incarnated in humanity under certain determined historical conditions. . . with this idea, we have the seeds of a *historical* conception of knowledge."⁷³ He claims, again, that Hegel was the first philosopher to secularize this concept of historical revelation, through his philosophy of Absolute Spirit in the *Phenomenology*.

Kojève's manuscript soon shifts tone, however, toward an analysis of "consciousness" (*soznatel'nost'*) as the defining characteristic of wisdom and links this philosophical definition of consciousness with the pervasive spread of political references to a "conscious proletariat" and "conscious citizenry" in the Soviet Union.⁷⁴ Kojève acknowledges the development of this historical view of revealed wisdom since Hegel into Marxist-Leninist politics, where he claims that Stalinism cultivates a sense of self-awareness that encourages humanity to reasonable action: in other words, "the ideal of a 'realization' is linked directly to that of a communist society which is, from Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist point of view, the definitive ideal for all of humanity."⁷⁵ If, for

72. Ibid.

73. Ibid.

74. These sections on communism or Stalinism were not included when the first fragments of this manuscript were published by Rutkevich.

75. Bibliothèque nationale de France (NAF), Paris 28320, Fonds Alexandre Kojève.

example, in a pre-communist society, the Russian proletariat was unable to explain why he purchases a bottle of vodka, the conscious Soviet proletariat has the awareness both to understand why he is purchasing the vodka but also the *reason* he requires the means to purchase it (“*Why* does he need money?”). Kojève makes clear that a conscious proletariat is not yet able to answer *all* questions, but nevertheless the proletariat understands its theoretical potential to do so, as this potential is incorporated into the proletariat’s conscious relationship to communist society more broadly. Thus, the conscious proletariat makes motions towards becoming a sage by signaling an eventual possibility to answer all questions, the possibility of which is at the heart of human historical development: “the revolutionary socialist—just like the philosopher—seeks to enlarge as much as possible the circle of questions that humanity can address to itself about itself, and thus seeks to provide as many convincing answers as possible.”⁷⁶

Kojève’s political interpretation of wisdom under Stalin, taken with his previously developed philosophical interpretation of wisdom, greatly suggests that he intended for the Russian-language manuscript to be published in the Soviet Union, lending further credence to any claim that this work was a version of the work destroyed at the Soviet embassy. It is nevertheless characteristic of Kojève’s ideological eclecticism that the philosopher would later repeat similar claims for political wisdom, for example, in the context of post-war France, writing several reviews of *nouveaux romans* in which he heralded their depiction of de Gaullist society as another instance of realized human potential.⁷⁷ Consciousness and wisdom, it turns out, are rather abstract concepts that allow for often contradictory political applications.

Kojève’s insistence on developing a *secular* theory of wisdom, however, remained a constant throughout his career. Its earliest roots were to be found in his dissertation work on Solov’ev, and his belief in the manifestation of divine wisdom in the material world. Although his emigration and quick absorption by the French canon has until now obfuscated this connection to the Russian tradition, Kojève’s long engagement with revelation, historical conclusion, and theanthropy nevertheless firmly place him within speculative Russian thought of the early twentieth century. The impetus to achieve a fully realized homogeneous state echoes eschatological claims for revolution among fin-de-siècle radicals, and the uniformity of the material world in *Atheism* shares its origin with early avant-garde strategies to create “a single total project of reorganizing the entire universe,” itself an initially theological

76. *Ibid.*

77. Kojève wrote reviews of Raymond Queneau’s *Pierrot mon ami* (1942), *Loin de Reuil* (1944), and *Le dimanche de la vie* (1952) in “Les Romans de la Sagesse,” *Critique* no. 60 (May 1, 1952): 387–97. Four years later he would review Françoise Sagan’s *Bonjour tristesse* (1954) and *Un certain sourire* (1956) in “Le dernier monde nouveau,” *Critique* no. 111 (August 1, 1956): 702–8. Both reviews position the novels as artifacts of a French society in which wisdom had been “achieved” amongst its citizenry. David Macey provides an excellent overview of Kojève’s critique in “The Sage and the Philosopher, or Queneau’s Suburbs,” *Parallax* 3, no. 1 (February, 1997): 13–21.

idea.⁷⁸ Revolution is a unification of the material world, as the means for humanity to answer fully the questions it poses to itself.

Kojève's early works thus reveal continuity between Russian philosophy in diaspora and an exceptionally transformative period in western continental thought. It is admittedly difficult to trace the movement of an idea as it travels across national traditions. This difficulty is compounded by Kojève's own explicit deviations from Russian thought, in particular his atheist interpretation of a religious concept. His example, however, might encourage us to expand the ways in which we think of philosophical canons—particularly in light of transnational exchanges, often undertaken in diaspora, which might otherwise remain invisible due to rigid defining boundaries of what constitutes a national philosophy. In examining Kojève's early philosophy as a development of, or response to, Russian thought, one discovers a remarkable ideational thread linking the Russian diaspora, French interwar philosophers, and broad, all-encompassing philosophies of state and history before and after the Second World War. In an era of strong states, total war, and nascent Cold War supranationalism, the notion of a homogeneous state that could satisfy its citizenry appealed across political and national orientations, discussed by émigré Orthodox priests and French bureaucrats alike. Its vector of transmission was, perhaps unsurprisingly, an émigré who had himself crossed major (geographical and ideological) borders of Europe for France, bringing with him a religious tradition rich in speculations on collective governance and end times.

78. Boris Grois, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle, (Princeton, 1992), 16–19. Grois describes the ubiquitous influence of Russian religious thought on the radical convergence of aesthetics and statecraft in the avant-garde, inspired by Solov'ev's belief that "people are in the power of cosmic forces and can be saved only together with the entire universe in a single apocatastasis that will neither add to nor remove anything from the world, but will simply unveil the hidden harmonious relationship among all things within it," 19.