



# Introduction to Alexandre Kojève, “On Creative Freedom and Souls’ Fabrication. Response to Professor N. A. Berdyaev.”

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If, initially, victory in World War II had offered brief hope and a sense of optimism in the Soviet Union, a subsequent, renewed wave of repressive policies would quickly come to define Soviet culture of the 1940s, a period often referred to as “High Stalinism.” Spearheading these efforts was once more Andrei Zhdanov, who had been the organizer of the First Soviet Writers’ Congress in 1934 and a leading advocate for the deadly purges within the Communist Party in the 1930s. In 1946, Zhdanov delivered a lecture to a meeting of writers and the Party’s Central Committee, denouncing what he saw as widespread deviations from the socialist realist method within Soviet culture. He targeted in particular the literary journals *Leningrad* and *Zvezda*, and writers Anna Akhmatova and Mikhail Zoshchenko, casting them as vestiges of a decadent, bourgeois pre-revolutionary era and emblematic of failure to submit to the aesthetic demands of the Party. His attacks would both effectively end the career of the writers, expelling them from the Writers’ Union, as well as signal that a new era of aggressive censorship had been imposed upon Soviet culture, henceforth referred to as the Zhdanov Doctrine or *Zhdanovshchina*.

The following text, written by Kojève sometime after 1946, published here for the first time, illustrates the extent to which the philosopher closely followed these ongoing events in his former country. Equally evident are his lingering sympathies: here, Kojève offers an apology for Zhdanovshchina and Soviet cultural censorship. His adopted position mirrors previous writings in émigré press from the late 1920s, including the essay “Philosophy and the Communist Party”<sup>1</sup> in the journal *Eurasia [Evraziia]*, in which Kojève explored potential benefits to philosophy stemming from harsh Soviet censorship of philosophers (Kojève 2021). Likewise, the *Sofia* manuscript, written in 1941, illustrates Kojève’s interest in tethering his philosophical

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<sup>1</sup>This text has been recently translated into English as Alexandre Kojève, “Philosophy and the Communist Party,” trans. Trevor Wilson, *Radical Philosophy* 2.11 (2021): <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/philosophy-and-the-communist-party>.

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views to Stalinism and the political novelty of the Soviet experiment. If by the late 1950s, Kojève had seemingly abandoned his positive assessment of the Soviet Union (as evinced in his observations of post-Stalinist Moscow in 1957, also included in this issue), “On Creative Freedom and Souls’ Fabrication” suggests relative conformity in Kojève’s political views, and a willingness to endorse the violence and censorship of Soviet authorities relatively late into his life.

As its subtitle suggests, Kojève’s text responds to an editorial that had been written in 1946 by Nikolai Berdyaev in the émigré journal *Russian News* [*Russkie novosti*], also entitled “On Creative Freedom and Souls’ Fabrication” (Berdiaev 2008). Berdyaev was arguably the most fêted representative of pre-Soviet philosophy to have resettled abroad. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, he denounces Zhdanov’s efforts to stifle the work of authors such as Akhmatova and Zoshchenko, who like him emblemized the richness of Russian literary culture prior to its fragmentation under pressures imposed by the Writers’ Union in the 1930s. Berdyaev briefly traces the history of failed efforts at social control through censorship within Russian history, dating as far back as Muscovy. His essay reiterates claims that he had made elsewhere (such as in *The Meaning of the Creative Act* [*Smysl tvorchestva*, 1916]) on the primacy of unbridled creativity as a prerequisite for human freedom.

By contrast, Kojève speculates that censorship might, in fact, benefit a state: when faced with more immediate socioeconomic concerns, such as developing military infrastructure and agricultural capacity, the state might justifiably prioritize guns over poems. He further challenges Berdyaev’s belief that “freer” societies make better art, offering a particularly provocative example: the Middle Ages, so often invoked by Berdyaev in his writings as a foil to the spiritually barren condition of modernity, was nevertheless an era marked by aggressive state and religious censorship. Could Berdyaev, therefore, similarly deride the demands of medieval aesthetic orthodoxy, as he does his Marxist colleagues back home? For Kojève, history illustrates that, contrary to Berdyaev’s championing of free creative practice, good art often emerges within the context of tyranny, thus once more justifying Soviet censorship of its artists.

Indeed, to support his apology for the Soviet regime, Kojève cites Plato’s own infamous banishment of poets from the republic, the so-called “Akhmatovs” of the ancient Greek epoch. The comment, of course, alludes first and foremost to the internal cultural politics of the Soviet Union, yet it must inevitably be read, too, as an assessment of a (dis-)engaged intellectual culture more broadly. Several years later, in his debate with Leo Strauss over the latter’s reading of *Hiero, or Tyrannicus* by Xenophon, Kojève makes the case for the philosopher’s active participation in affairs of state. He cautions against what he terms a bourgeois, isolationist understanding of the philosopher’s social role, ensconced in the quiet “garden” of the “Republic of Letters” (Strauss 1963, p. 152). Instead, the philosopher must “enter” and “participate” in history, even as an advisor to the tyrant. While such an argument aligns with Kojève’s other political writings written in the 1940s, including his theory of authority (including Stalinism) in *The Notion of Authority* (Kojève 2004), this brief editorial serves to add an aesthetic or cultural dimension to Kojève’s political philosophy. The arts, including philosophy, must not isolate themselves from a challenging political reality, but must instead fully immerse themselves in the rough waters if they are

to survive. In this regard Kojève thus shares common ground with Jean-Paul Sartre. Himself an admirer of Kojève, Sartre had famously, in roughly the same years of both the Zhdanovshchina and Kojève's writing of this essay, called for a "committed literature" (*littérature engagée*) that would shun the bourgeois desire of an art for art's sake and would instead firmly respond to the political demands of society (Sartre 1945).

These aesthetic and political concerns, however, were rendered particularly acute from the removed position of diaspora. Since Kojève's letter was never published, we cannot know how Berdyaev might have responded, yet the juxtaposition of the two figures and their views is telling: Berdyaev and Kojève, as two of the most influential Russian émigré philosophers in interwar France, had found compelling if at times contrasting audiences for their works abroad. Berdyaev's most popular works often sought to reclaim and thus popularize the rich traditions of Russian (religious) philosophy, appealing to French intellectuals in his existentialist reading of freedom, individualism, and creativity through the lens of Christian thought. By contrast, Kojève's intervention was more transformative in scope. Perhaps echoing the radically destructive ethos of the Russian avant-garde, Kojève often justifies the use of revolutionary violence in the pursuit of the creation of the new. With opposing conclusions and political allegiances, the pairing of Berdyaev and Kojève thus highlights the sheer heterogeneity of the Russian intellectual tradition: here torn between liberalism and Marxism, and the preservation of cultural tradition and utopian constructions of a future society. Such tensions and problems had indeed remained with Russian philosophy, even as it had fled and permeated into the West after the Revolution.

## Declarations

**Competing Interests** The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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The author certifies that he has no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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