

Ivan Bunin and George Fedotov: A Discourse on the 1917 Revolution in Philosophical and Literary Thought of the Silver Age

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Abstract

The article discusses the dominant topic of Russian emigrant historiography: discourse on the Russian revolution of 1917 and its interpretation by I.A. Bunin and G.P. Fedotov. The author looks for parallel assessments of the 1917 Revolution that arise from philosophical and journalistic works of Ivan Bunin and George Fedotov. The author reveals similarities in the views of the fiction writer and the religious thinker and ideas of key Russian authors of the Silver Age of Russian culture. The article analyzes the specifics of comprehension of historical events in philosophical and artistic circles of the Silver Age, as a part of historiographical discourse about Russia. The materials involved show that the purpose and content of historiographical thinking were not mere reconstruction or chronological statement of facts but were aimed at identifying spiritual causes of the troublesome period in Russia and the hidden cultural meaning of revolutionary events. The scope of this research involves philosophical and literary works of Bunin and Fedotov in which they comprehend the patterns of development of Russia and conceive the logic of collapse of its state, culture, and historical social order. The paper focuses on commonness of the philosophizing trajectory and the shared emigrant fate of these bright representatives of Russian emigration. A special attention is paid to the way of arranging of historiographical narrative of Russian revolution in philosophical, literary, and journalistic texts of Russian *émigrés*. The unique value of both thinkers consists in the intense sublimation of their spiritual experience, their fusion with the fate of Russia; and political emigration only increased the productive power of these outstanding talents.

Keywords: Russian literature of Silver Age, Russian revolution, philosophy of culture, Russian philosophy abroad, historiography.

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Иван Бунин и Георгий Федотов: дискурс о революции 1917 года в философской и художественной мысли Серебряного века

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Аннотация

В статье исследуется ведущая тема русской эмигрантской историософии – дискурс о революции 1917 года и ее интерпретация И.А. Буниным и Г.П. Федотовым. Автором проводятся параллели в оценках событий революции 1917 года, возникающие в философских и публицистических работах Ивана Бунина и Георгия Федотова. Выявляется общность взглядов писателя и мыслителя с идеями и историософскими концепциями других представителей культурной элиты России – ключевых авторов Серебряного века. В рамках рассмотрения историософского дискурса о России анализируются особенности осмысления исторических событий в философской и художественной мысли Серебряного века. Показано, что цель и содержание историософских размышлений мыслителей не сводились к реконструированию и хронологическому изложению фактов, а были направлены на выявление духовных причин русской смуты и глубинного культурного смысла анализируемых исторических событий. Предметом исследования являются литературные работы и публицистические статьи Бунина и Федотова, в которых они пытаются определить закономерности развития России и понять логику обвала ее государства, культуры, исторически сложившегося социального порядка бытия. В центре внимания находится общность траектории философствования двух ярчайших представителей русского зарубежья общей эмигрантской судьбы. Специальным сюжетом настоящего исследования является способ выстраивания историософского нарратива о русской революции в публицистических, философских и художественных текстах русской

эмиграции. Особую ценность творчество рассматриваемых авторов представляет как воплощение сублимации их духовного опыта, отождествления его с судьбой России, когда эмиграция только усилила продуктивную мощь их большого дарования.

Ключевые слова: русская литература Серебряного века, революция, философия культуры, философы русского зарубежья, историософия.

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Introduction

The issue of the revolution, as the central theme of the entire decline stage of the Russian Empire, appeared in the meditations of its cultural elite as a reflection based on a complex set of ideas and value concepts. For the authors who postulated the primacy of spiritual values – and who, although being close, did not belong to the circle of the authors of *Vekhi (Landmarks): A Collection of Essays on the Russian Intelligentsia* (1909), – the topic of culture came to the forefront as a key characteristic of the content of national history (which determines its spiritual experience and specific social life). Such authors, seemingly belonging to different creative departments – literature and philosophy – include Ivan Alekseyevich Bunin (1870–1953) and George (Georgy) Petrovich Fedotov (1886–1951). The legacy of Bunin and Fedotov is actively studied by modern researchers. In our article, we propose to look at an important aspect of their works, which allows us to consider the literary narrative of Bunin and the philosophical and journalistic narrative of Fedotov as a special genre of historiosophical reflection, its subject being the Russian revolution of 1917. Bunin's book *Cursed Days. A Diary of the Revolution (Okayannye dni)* represents an image of Russia, created in his diary entries of 1918 – the early 1920s, with its artistic analysis of the Russian catastrophe. And this appears very

close to the image of Russia, lost due to Russian intelligentsia's hatred of autocracy, in the 1918 article "The Image of Russia" by George Fedotov [Fedotov 1991]. We are interested not only in the obvious parallelism of images, but also in the method of the authors' historiosophical interpretation. This formulation of the problem allows us to consider the experiences of Bunin and Fedotov as a continuity of the tradition of the Russian philosophy of history.

In this regard, we note that the Russian philosophy of history is closely connected with the German idealistic tradition of philosophizing, and interest in historiosophy came to Russia in the 1830s [Bely 1994] together with Hegelianism. Among the works of Russian poets, writers, and thinkers of the European inclination (A.S. Pushkin, L.N. Tolstoy, F.M. Dostoevsky, V.S. Solovyov, N.A. Berdyaev, F.A. Stepan), there appear texts that pose historiosophical problems [Zhukova 2017, 301]. Such commonness of literary and philosophical narratives, characteristic of the Russian intellectual tradition, begins to manifest itself in post-revolutionary journalism as a single historiosophical discourse.

In this sense, the ideas of Fedotov that were set forth in his journalistic articles of 1918–1930 (where the writer shows the path of Russia's revival through repentance and purification of the national spirit and the spirit of each person) and Bunin's literary texts and diary testimonies constitute a common thematic field and can be attributed to the historiosophical genre – to the large tradition of Russian philosophy of history.

Historiosophical discourse in Russian philosophy and literature of the 20th century

At the beginning of the 20th century, when scientific schools were actively developing at the historical and philological faculties of Saint Petersburg and Moscow Universities, the philosophy of history became one of the priority research fields. It is fair to note that the traditions of a philosophical attitude toward history as well as a historiosophical attitude toward literature were laid by V.O. Klyuchevsky, V.I. Gerye, and I.M. Grevs (G.P. Fedotov was a student of the latter lecturer).

Let us emphasize that the concepts of "historiosophy¹," "historiosophical," as they used to characterize Russian thought, with its focus on the problem of the philosophy of Russian history, were among

¹ In some English editions of N.A. Berdyaev's works, the word "historiosophy" is translated as "historical philosophy" [Berdyaev 1960, 25].

the core concepts of the philosophers of the Russian emigration [Berdyayev 1955, 22; Berdyayev 1960, 25]. The modern researcher N.V. Zaytseva defines historiosophy as the metaphysics of history, since the field of work of most historiosophists is the deep structures and archetypes of historical understanding [Zaytseva 2013], “we can say that this is a kind of metaphysics of historical reasoning” [Ivanov 1909].

In the Western scientific tradition of the 20th century, along with the continued construction of large-scale systems of the philosophy of history by A. Toynbee, O. Spengler, F. Fukuyama [Fukuyama 1992], S.P. Huntington [Huntington 1996], criticism of historiosophy appears, due to the fact that the critical and analytical philosophy of history, or intellectual history, becomes the main source of philosophical and historical knowledge. This is partly why the English classics of philosophy have rarely shown interest in nationally oriented historiosophical constructions [Bryusov 1934, 525]. However, within the framework of intellectual history, there develops a certain recognition or justification of historiosophy, even though without direct reference. In particular, Hayden V. White in his book *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* [White 1973] practically defines “historiography” as a literary genre, and its characterization as a text becomes a key property of the historical narrative.

One of the leading toposes of Russian historiosophy is the discourse on the Russian revolution of 1917. In that Revolution, many of its Russian contemporaries saw not only a large-scale socio-political event – there was an understanding of this historical event in a broad historiosophical perspective, in the context of larger historical epochs – imperial Russia, counting about two hundred years since Peter the Great’s reforms, and ancient Russia, with its historiosophical concept of *Moscow, the Third Rome* (i.e., Moscow State as a successor of the Roman and Byzantine Empires). Thus, the roots of the October Revolution were sought in the Russian Church Schism (after the reforms of Patriarch Nikon in 1653) as well as in the historiosophical utopias of the 19th century, which had evolved into the *narodniki* movement and revolutionary apocalypticism. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Russian cultural elite, believing these utopias, hoped for a spiritual re-creation of the world.

At the same time, in the works of L.P. Karsavin, P.M. Bitsilli and other Russian historians, the research interest was focused on iden-

tifying the cultural mechanisms of history, psychological factors of social development, and the peculiarities of a person's inner world [Karsavin 1993, 351]. The concept of "neo-Christianity," elaborated in late 19th century by D.S. Merezhkovsky and based on the idea of spiritual re-birth of the world, was taken up by former Marxists, who later became major thinkers of the so-called "Russian religious and philosophical Renaissance." It was specifically reflected in the spiritual search of G. Fedotov, who participated in A. Meyer's group called "Resurrection," as well as in the cultural retrospectivism of I. Bunin, with his orientation toward the heritage of Russian classical literature.

The creative community of the Silver Age in Russian culture yearned for change, although such expectations, according to some researchers, were rather cultural than political [Gershenzon 2007]. In this regard, the historiosophy of the Silver Age had a rather romantic connotation. The artists of the Silver Age did not deny social revolution as a possible way of organizing human society, seeing it not as the goal of history, but as a transition to a new world order, interpreting the political and social forms of revolution as inalienable properties of deep restructuring of the spirit.

However, the actual revolutionary processes did not come true to their speculative expectations. At least because, over time and under the external influence of secularized culture, in the educated strata of Russian society, along with the revolution, religious consciousness weakened, which had previously served as linking glue of the state and the basis of the unity of the Russian people [Voskresenskaya 2008]. The resulting spiritual emptiness for the majority of the Russian educated class turned into a political upheaval and an incredible increase in crime, both with ideological claims and without them.

According to many thinkers of the Silver Age, the destructive nature of the revolution was caused by the deficiencies in Russian moral consciousness, which manifested themselves in "denial of personal moral responsibility and personal moral discipline, in the weak development of a sense of duty and the sense of honor" [Berdyayev 1990, 79]. The common conclusion of the searches of the cultural elite about the revival and moral recovery of Russia through revolution led to the inevitable realization of the need in change of souls and minds, but not though in violent overthrow of the existing political order.

Historiosophical analysis of the revolution in the work of I.A. Bunin

What happened after October 1917 was already perceived by many, even by original proponents of the revolution, as “the apocalypse of our time,” since as a result of the revolution, absolutely all vital functions of the state and conditions for stable social existence were destroyed. According to Bunin, the revolution led to the triumph of “the beast.”

Ivan Bunin was hostile to both Russian revolutions of February and October 1917, taking these historical events as a personal disaster. For him, post-revolutionary Russia looks tragically doomed. In his diary entry included in the book *Cursed Days*, he wrote: “[Moscow. January 1, 1918] This damn year is finally over. But what will be next? Perhaps things will get even worse. And that seems even likely” [Bunin 1998, 27]. In May 1918, Bunin left Moscow for Odessa, in February 1920 he emigrated to the Balkans and from there to France [Dolgoplov 197].

Bunin of the *Cursed Days* period is consonant with Fedotov of “The Image of Russia” period in his world outlook more and more inclined to religious reflection. In turn, in his fatal consciousness of the wrongness of life, Fedotov inherits Bunin’s intentions of dialogue with God, and in Fedotov’s case, personal repentance. With their autonomy from any literary and philosophical camps, both Bunin and Fedotov are artists of consonant with the Silver Age [Isupov 2001]. Thus, overcoming the conventional boundaries of contemporary literary schools, Bunin was able to build an original artistic system, based on a common world-view of the Silver Age, although often ambiguous and contradictory [Maltsev 1994].

In his diary entries, Bunin seems to be arguing with Alexander Blok’s poem *The Twelve* (1918): in the days when “Blok heard the music of the revolution, Bunin heard the cacophony of rebellion,” as literary critic I. Sukhikh rightly pointed out [Sukhikh 2009]. For a long time, critics denied Bunin the ability to see the world holistically, in a philosophical way, defining him only as a talented writer with extraordinarily sharp vision in prose and verse. The religious and philosophical processes of the time, of course, influenced Bunin as well, and the events that took place in history became a trigger for his metahistorical and philosophical understanding of modernity. His vision of history is not limited to a description of events, but appears as an experience of comprehending the spirit and meaning of historical processes. It is a deep emotional reaction to what is happening. Bunin builds a consistent system of world perception in his *Cursed*

J.V. KLEPIKOVA. Ivan Bunin and George Fedotov: A Discourse on the 1917 Revolution ... Days [Fironov 1998, 199–2002]. O. Astashchenko points to lyricism and emotional richness of Bunin's texts, analyzing the writer's artistic method used in presenting historical facts [Astashchenko 2003].

Seeing the triumph of chaos in the revolution, Bunin foresaw an influence of the criminal element on its outcome: "And I'm seized with horror when I think how many people are going about in clothes stripped from the corpses, of those who have already been murdered!" [Bunin 1998, 131]. The writer did not perceive the new order and completely identified Russia, which remained in his childhood and youthful memories, with post-revolutionary and Soviet Russia. Revolutionary thinking was unacceptable for him, and he spoke of the future after the revolution as an eternal fairy tale "about the red bull." Bunin pondered on the concept of revolution as an elemental force: "Earthquake, plague, cholera are also elemental forces. No one extols them, though; no one canonizes them; [people overcome]² them. And the revolution is always 'deepening,'" he notes in the conclusion to *Cursed Days* [Bunin 1998, 108–109].

But Bunin does not idealize pre-revolutionary Russia; rather, in his fiction, he continuously subjects the world to a severe scrutiny for "cultural conformity" and social adequacy. Thus, even in the short story "Antonov Apples" Bunin displays degeneration of the nobility, and in the short story "Village" he already prophesies about the coming disasters. Behind the collapse of Russian pre-revolutionary life, Bunin saw a collapse of world harmony. The revolutionary collapse for Bunin consisted not only in the defeat of democracy and the triumph of tyranny, but also in the irreplaceable loss of the integral way of life – its inner harmony. He understood the Revolution as a break in historical time, feeling a survivor who still cherishes the past of his fathers and grandfathers. Our children and grandchildren, Bunin thought bitterly, will not even be able to imagine the Russia in which we once (that is, yesterday) lived, which we did not value and did not understand "all this power, wealth, happiness..."

In *Cursed Days* the writer talks about the church as a world of all that is good and merciful, where all earthly suffering is comforted and relieved: "Just think that formerly people of the circle to which I partially belonged went to church only for funerals!" [Bunin 1998, 209]. Thus, in his work, Bunin focused on both the real and the meta-physical dimensions of revolutionary events, reproaching himself

² There is a mistake in the English translation of the *Cursed Days*: "no one overcomes them" instead of "people overcome them" [Bunin 1998, 109].

and other members of the intelligentsia for their past indifference to religious affairs, believing that because of such indifference, by the time of the revolution, the people's soul was empty. But of course, for Bunin, the individual was a key measure of history.

With his work, the writer proved that no socio-political changes are capable of canceling critical stages in the life of an individual: trials by love and death, awareness of the joy and tragic finiteness of individual human existence. The harmonious unity of man and God (nature) appears as the basis of I.A. Bunin's poetic and philosophical world, shown to the reader at different levels of being of a person and society: from social sketches of the life of noblemen, peasants and intellectuals to the comprehension of the metaphysical depths of the Russian soul. Bunin was able to observe and capture human types in their national specificity and cultural universalism. In one of these types, Bunin sees the predominance of Russia, in the other type of national identity, the legacy of the ancient pre-Slavic tribes of Chud and Merya prevail. And, in Bunin's opinion, both types are characterized by changeable moods and "shakiness."

He is attracted by the most complex aspects of life: the meaning of individual existence for him is always wider and deeper than social and ideological ends, and we can always feel a historiosophical depth in the speech of his heroes. All of Bunin's literary work is permeated with a sense of the history and culture of Russia, whose artistic interpretation becomes the main subject of his historiosophical reflection.

Comprehension of the revolution in G.P. Fedotov's philosophy of history

It should be noted that, like other contemporary Russian philosophers and writers (N. Berdyaev, S. Frank, and I. Bunin), Fedotov studied the individual as a special spiritual unit in the historical process. Man as a free and creative being is the main character in history, the creator of culture. Fedotov notes that history and culture are, in fact, human concepts. He is quite skeptical about the theory of rigid determinism in historical development. For Fedotov, history is always an open process, shaped by acts of free human will: "For history is the human world – not natural and not Divine – and freedom reigns in it" [Fedotov 1992b, 22].

Similar to Bunin, spiritual culture was in the focus of Fedotov's attention in many of his journalistic articles devoted to historical events

in Russia. Fedotov insisted that post-revolutionary Russia should revive culturally, but without nationalistic coloring, despite his absolute conviction that there were all the necessary resources in the depths of Russian culture in order to revive the national spirit and overcome the chaos of the revolution. "The revolution alone... could not have turned our national consciousness upside down" [Fedotov 1992a, 168]. Fedotov wrote, believing that the crisis of consciousness had begun long before the revolution. It is important to note that he understood the national consciousness in the Orthodox vein, comparable to the consciousness of an individual person, with a specific historical vocation. This always remained an essential category in the thinker's historiography. It is the spiritual principle, according to Fedotov, that is the driving force of the historical process in Russia. This is confirmed by his appeal – in the 1918 article "The Image of Russia" – to clothe the great soul of Russia with flesh. Reading historical contexts in an anthropological vein, we can characterize Fedotov as a researcher who tends to use a number of special methods in his constructions – first of all, cultural-anthropological, cultural-philosophical and sociological ones. Fedotov's philosophical and anthropological approach also included recognition of the human personality as the highest value, and a religious philosophical interpretation of man as a spiritual being expanded the scope of his study of the historical past and present, which allowed him to go into the field of forecasting the future proceeding from the general logic of the development of history and comprehending its meaning. We agree with modern Russian philosopher O.A. Zhukova in that all of Fedotov's work is a long answer to the question: how did it become possible that this global historical and metaphysical catastrophe happened to Russia? [Zhukova 2017, 444]. In most of his philosophical and journalistic works, Fedotov provides well-argued philosophical criticism of Russian historical experience, using a very broad historical base. For him, the entire Russian culture, for all its historical variability, followed a general logic, expressed in a constant return to the universal archetypal themes and subjects.

In *Letters on Russian Culture*, Fedotov also reveals the social types of Russian people, including practically opposite types: on the one hand, the type of the intellectual that developed in Russia at the beginning of the 19th century, and, on the other hand, the "Moscow" Russian type. The former of them tends to self-sacrifice, seeking the ultimate truth, but is indifferent to the cause of building culture. The latter type was formed under the influence of the Moscow State, it is characterized by calmness and simplicity [Savintsev 2012].

Fedotov critically reconsidered the cultural and social history of Russia [Zhukova 2017, 454; Klepikova 2019]. The focus of his research as a thinker was on Russian history, not only due to his professional historical education, but due to his love, in the Christian understanding of this category, of the “image of Russia,” which is so changeable, but infinitely valuable [Fedotov 1991]. For Fedotov, Russia’s past was inseparable from its present and future. He was convinced that there was an enduring historical continuity, therefore, he perceived the revolution as a cultural catastrophe. This also determines the consonance and proximity of his views to the historiosophical thoughts of I. Bunin and the ideas of other immigrant intellectuals, such as P. Struve and S. Frank.

Fedotov argues that no historical breaks in revolutionary epochs can destroy the historical continuity [Fedotov 1992a, 165]. The idea of the deep inner unity of history is fundamental in his philosophical understanding of the historical process. George Fedotov’s view of the history of Russia is the view of a philosopher and metaphysician who strives to comprehend the destiny of Russia.

Fedotov is often reproached for a certain negligence about the terms and categories that he applied. The special methodology that he uses in historiosophical research is really functionally necessary for the writer, but it is not valuable in itself, due to the secondary ontological status of objects studied in some specific sciences (history, sociology, political science, and economics). For Fedotov, the main method of comprehending the history of Russia is recognizing its image through the prism of the human soul and the thinker’s conviction that a person is the principal author of history, and the freedom of his choice determines the course of the historical process and defines the ratio of good and evil in a particular historical moment. The Orthodox historian, according to the thinker, has to accept the bitter truth about human nature, revealed by “sociological naturalism” [Fedotov 1932, 11], but this will only be half-truth, as his work will dwell on various contexts. To this “half-truth,” Fedotov opposes the truth of the Spirit, which has its own sphere of power, the focus of which is living sanctity. The reservations we have now made do not mean that Fedotov is non-scientific in his research, since the truth, according to Fedotov, does not precede research, but is revealed in the process of research. According to Fedotov, there is but one method of comprehended things through experience for a Christian, a Jew, or an atheist. Hence, he saw the possibility of joint work in human search for the truth, its verification and criticism [Fedotov 1932, 7].

Similar to Bunin, Fedotov viewed the historical catastrophe that happened to Russia as a most important catalyst for thought, determining the direction of his historiosophical work and the emotionally colored, artistic style of his philosophical journalism.

Conclusion

An analysis of fiction and journalistic texts about the Russian revolution, belonging to thinkers and writers who found themselves in emigration and adhered to right-wing/liberal views, reveals the connection between the idea of the Revolution and the Apocalypse. Both of these present eschatological experiences, reflecting the finiteness of the world and the inevitability of its transformation. From our point of view, modern interpretation of the works of Russian literature of the 20th century, depicting the revolutionary historical experience of the people, becomes possible when philosophical, historiographic, and literary texts are read and construed in unity, as a single cultural discourse. In the logic of this approach, we consider the fiction and diary entries of I.A. Bunin and the philosophical journalism of G.P. Fedotov as a common historiosophical narrative, united by the topic of the revolution, which becomes a major event in life and history, an existential, artistic, philosophical, and political fact. It seems that with regard to the work of both authors, as well as many thinkers of the Russian Silver Age who experienced emigration, it is possible to talk about a single historiosophical text that recreates the canvas of Russian cultural history [Stepun 1993] and constitutes an absolutely unique, special experience of history, which Bunin and Fedotov perceived as a national tragedy. Finding themselves pushed outside the physical boundaries of the development of Russian culture, Bunin and Fedotov, like many intellectuals in emigration, applied memory as a function of culture in their work devoted to the history of Russia. In their historiosophical texts, they preserve and recreate universal images of national culture, reminiscent of the ongoing struggle for man in world history, in which the Revolution of 1917 turned into a spiritual and cultural catastrophe of Russia, which was philosophically diagnosed by George Fedotov and artistically captured by Ivan Bunin.

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