

# N.A. Berdyaev and His German Contemporaries on the Method of Philosophy of History

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**Abstract** — the subject of the study includes the methods of philosophical-historical knowledge developed in the works of N.A. Berdyaev, as well as his contemporaries, German thinkers W. Dilthey, E. Troeltsch and H.G. Gadamer. The author is not limited to a comparative analysis of the above methods – they become complementary elements of the method of this study. The essence of this method, which in this case can be seen as a result of the study, is that in order to penetrate the mystery of “historical”, we shall first of all; understand the history as our own to its depth, as our history and destiny. The life experience of the cognizing subject is not just a means; it always constitutes the initial prerequisite for the interpretation of past events. Thus, the creature of a historical phenomenon can open itself only when we understand the history as something that is still happening, and moreover, which is happening with us. Such an approach makes it possible to present the relations of the two leading lines of philosophical-historical knowledge – Russian and German – in the form of a relevant dialogue, which constitutes a relative novelty of the study. At the same time, the problem of forming the common one is transferred from the field of theoretical-methodological, to the practical, existential, ontological field, thus contributing to going beyond the current consideration of the issue of modern, rather difficult relations between Russia and the West, which is the practical importance of the study.

**Keywords** — *historical knowledge, philosophy of history, method, “historical”, tradition, dialogue.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

According to the Russian philosopher Nikolay Berdyaev, the relations of the reflecting subject to the historical object can be presented in the form of a scheme that includes three periods, each of which corresponds to a certain attitude to historical knowledge. The first period, or era, is characterized by the fact that the subject quite integrally and wholly exists in some settled and established historical system. At this time, the questions about the meaning of history or about the historical movement do not arise with the necessary urgency. Moreover, here the thought is static and therefore the human mind negatively perceives the dynamics of the object of history. The period is interesting for historical knowledge, but it is not yet conceived in it.

In order for historical knowledge to arise and the construction of the philosophy of history to begin, it is necessary to come to the reflection of historical knowledge,

when in the consciousness of the reflecting subject there is the possibility of opposing the historical object and the subject. The reflexion of historical knowledge is born when there is a gap between the reflexing subject and the internal entity, the secret of “historical” representing the historical object. The subject ceases to feel itself directly and holistically in the “historical”. Here the beginning of the historical movement is experienced as an erosion of foundations of the previous system and a pattern, and appears in the form of historical cataclysms and disasters.

However, Berdyaev believes that this second period is not deep enough to truly understand the historical process. For creation of the real philosophy of history, it is necessary, having endured an era of splitting, bifurcation and crash of the known vital foundations, to compare and oppose the two first periods in order to pass into the third condition of the human spirit. This condition gives a special acuity of consciousness, ability to reflect and understand, which allows returning and in a new, meaningful way, joining the inner soul and caches of historical life. This is the general scheme presented by the philosopher, which allow getting close to the problem indicated in the title of the paper [1].

Nowadays, the philosophy of history is awakened and increasingly claims its importance, – wrote German theologian and philosopher of culture Ernst Troeltsch, a contemporary of Berdyaev. The fundamental historization of our knowledge and thinking becomes a leading force and fundamentally defines modern worldviews. Therefore, the problem arising from this historization of advantages and disadvantages, becomes the main problem for our life today thus forming personal spiritual life and creating new socio-political conditions. This problem exists in modern sciences of all countries, but is particularly acute where traditional education aimed at historical self-insight suffers the crisis in one way or another [3].

If in the field of historical research there can be no real crisis, says Troeltsch, then the stronger the crisis is in the common philosophical foundations and elements of historical thinking, in the understanding of historical values, on the basis of which we have to think and design the connection of historical events. Thus, this crisis, if caused by the technique of historical research, but only partially, and mainly this science is healthy. Fundamentally, the crisis is connected with

thinking in the field of philosophy of history, where there is a desire for completeness of the whole, which has become really necessary. Here we shall create the new based on a sovereign sense of life.

The reasons for the crisis of historical thinking, according to Troeltsch, should be found in what can be called the connection of history with the worldview. Therefore, the tasks of the philosophy of history are to establish, on the one hand, the most general philosophical prerequisites and elements of historical knowledge, and on the other – the effect of this knowledge on the worldview of people. The problem of the philosophy of history, Troeltsch writes, is precisely to find the form of mutual ordering of these tasks required by the modern moment. This problem shall be reworded for every significant change in generations. It is known that the generation of Troeltsch himself was under a substantial impression of the World War I disaster.

The World War and the Revolution, Troeltsch writes, became a clear learning of a huge and terrible force. The practical test of all historical theories that emerged during the period of peace has come, and the effectiveness or inefficiency of each former word is tested. We feel the ground slipping away from under feet our feet, theorize and design not under the protection of the experiencing order, but in the storm of world transformations. There are various possibilities of subsequent formation as in the vortex around us, and first of all it is observed where the World War led to a total transformation, i.e. in Germany and Russia [14]. In this regard, it seems interesting to address to impressions and analyze the ideas of N.A. Berdyaev in more detail.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

According to Berdyaev, the primary and main theme of the world history, the foundation and beginning of historical is the theme of the fate of a man, which unfolds in the interaction of the human spirit and nature, space, in the process of freeing the free creating spirit of a man from the subsoil of natural necessity, from dependence and enslavement by lower natural beginnings of the natural whole [1]. In the history of mankind, Berdyaev writes, we see different forms of this interaction, which pass through different historical epochs. Everything is connected with the production and resolution of this topic, for example, in the world of ancient, in Greece, as in general in the whole ancient pagan world.

All the primary stages of human history that are characteristic of wild and barbaric peoples, ancient cultures, as well as the original history of the ancient world are the direct result of the act of the celestial-historical drama of the distance of a man from God, his sin. This drama drove the spirit of a man into the subsoil of natural necessity. There was a fall of a man, chaining him with natural elements, and he could no longer rise from this state on his own. Therefore, Berdyaev calls this drama the drama of freedom: freedom somehow regenerated in the need. Having lost its original freedom, the human spirit ceased to be conscious of it as a creating spiritual subject.

The human spirit, which fell in its free arbitrariness, was thus enslaved by nature, but at the same time was in internal

and deep connection with it. The spiritual life of nature itself here was more open to a man than to subsequent stages. Feeling like an inextricable part of nature, he perceived it as a living organism inhabited by elementary spirits. All ancient myths arose on the basis of continuous communication with these spirits or demons. External slavery in relation to nature was then for a man also slavery to his own lower elements and meant lack of internal freedom. But this immersion of the human spirit into the natural element, writes Berdyaev, was connected not only with the bitter dependence of a man, but also with the painful fear experienced before the demons of nature.

In different mysteries of ancient religions, a man was passionately eager to free himself from this slavery, from the power of the lower natural spirits, but nowhere and never did the mystics of the ancient world achieve the final liberation of a man, for they themselves were immersed in the cycle of the lower spontaneous nature. The ancient world, especially towards its end, was simply obsessed with horrors before the demons of nature, and this horror, as mystical cults intensified and multiplied, reached the highest size and became, indeed, unbearable [6]. The great feat of Christianity in the world was that it somehow by force extracted and freed a man from the power of demons, a spontaneous lower nature. Having returned to a man the internal freedom to which he was deprived when he was in the power of the spirits of nature, he removed him from this subordination to the natural world whole, and, having singled out, rose to heaven.

Only Christianity, Berdyaev believes, having brought a man out of the cycle of natural life and restored spiritual freedom, opened a new period in his history, when he, having realized his freedom, begins to determine his fate as a freely acting subject. By freeing a man from being subject to nature, Christianity defined him as central to the universe. This anthropocentric feeling was alien to an ancient man who felt like an inextricable part of nature, and was the main driving force behind the history of the new times.

The Christian history of liberating a man from nature, overcoming his subjugation to the lower spirits, involved leaving for the inner world to make a huge, heroic struggle with natural elements and forging a free human personality. This great feat was done by Christian saints beginning with the early period of hermitage through medieval monastic and through all the centuries into which this struggle was fought. Christianity for the first time recognized the infinite value of the human soul, brought the consciousness that this soul is worth more than anything in the world [9].

But this process of liberation from the natural element has the opposite side in Berdyaev's opinion – it is the end of the ancient world and the beginning of Christianity that marks a certain removal of a man from the inner life of nature [11]. An abyss is formed between a man who has embarked on the path of redemption and nature. In order for the human spirit to cease to slave to nature, Christianity somehow kills it, for until a certain spiritual retribution of a man is achieved, it threatens him with a new fall. Thus, the Christian period of history, unlike pre-Christian, characterizes above all this turning away from nature, as if the loss of keys to its inner life.

Definitely, the revival of paganism, the restoration of pagan religions, according to Berdyaev, is madness, but it is also crazy to see it only as an evil temptation. Paganism cannot be completely denied, for it was also a true revelation of God, only incomplete and unilateral [10]. Therefore, pagan culture, philosophy, art did not die, they formed the foundation of the world Christian culture, and fed the teachers and architects of the church. The insufficiency and lie of paganism is that it could not win back and assert the being. The law of decay destroyed the world and paganism stopped helplessly before it.

The problem is also that the Christian world, having rejected paganism, developed features of ambivalence, became kind of pagan-Christian. For example, Catholicism in general was paganism in Christian clothing, and the Christian state, family and life can be considered remnants of the pagan ancestral order. The dualism of the Christian era, Berdyaev believes, was manifested in the fact that the ascetic Christian mysticism of saints and hermits remained unconnected and even opposite to the Christian household [8].

The task now is not to renew Christianity with paganism, but to liberate Christianity from pagan life, to overcome the above dualism and to assert a new religious existence. The new era, which Berdyaev calls the era of love, could not yet come not only in the 13<sup>th</sup> but also in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – times and deadlines have not come. Many things had to happen before that in the world history and culture. This era has long been anticipated, the dream of it has always been laid down in Christianity, and it must finally come, marking the end of the dialectic of history and carrying out the covenant of true anthropology love.

“We live in the times of great historical crucial point”, Berdyaev writes. A new historical era has begun. The whole pace of historical development is significantly changing. It is not the same as it was before the outbreak of the World War and the Russian and European revolutions that followed the world war – it is significantly different. And this pace cannot be called other than catastrophic. Volcanic sources in the historical subsoil have opened. Everything was firm, and we get the impression of a particularly intense, especially sharp movement of the “historical””. According to Berdyaev, historical cataclysms usually have a desire to philosophically understand the course of history. So was the prophet Daniel, Saint Augustine and others.

Although in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the term “Philosophy of history” appeared and was first used by Voltaire, and besides, a number of historical books and works were created, the age of “enlightenment” from Berdyaev’s point of view is deeply anti-historical. Here the small, limited but self-affirming human mind in its own way claims to know the history of the historical old [7]. He arrogantly tries to put himself outside and over the superhuman secrets of being, from which comes, as its origins, all human culture and the lives of all the peoples of the earth; he seeks to make himself a judge over these secrets and subjugate them to himself. As the inner scourge for self-satisfaction, this mind befits certain blindness.

Indeed, it can be said that in the triumph of the “enlightenment” mind the science was born, which opposed

the knowing subject to the known object of history, having done a lot in this direction [12]. But celebrating its classical victories, this mind understands very little, to very few internally attached, most of the secrets of historical life are alien to it. Gradually there is such a process in which the cognition itself becomes remote, lost from sight, as it would cease to exist in its original reality, which makes it “historical” [5]. This process splits, internally separates the human mind from history and makes them obscure and hostile to each other.

Thus, a man begins to understand the whole story as something alien and imposed, pressing and enslaving him, against which he revolts in his knowledge and in his activities. Going by opposing ourselves to all the wealth of the world historical life, our mind recognizes, reveals only the yawning void of its privacy. At the same time, the person himself falls out of the direct stay in the historical. Thus, Berdyaev believes that it is possible to go only to the abyss, which unfolds in the history and in the person himself. Although the work on historical monuments and documents is definitely important and necessary, only the distracted use of them never adds to the “historical”, does not allow identifying it.

All the extensive German critical literature in the field of historical knowledge, according to Berdyaev, has undeniable merits in the development of various materials. It was able to collect a lot, accumulate a lot, partially identify. But the above-mentioned process of dismemberment and separation is particularly clear in the area of the work done by the historical criticism of “enlightenment”. First of all, this criticism ceased to be considered with the sacred continuity of the historical legend, began to expose and pursue historical shrines, to kill and destroy organic-traditional ones. It began to deny the “historical” as a specific reality, to produce such operations over it that it stopped being itself.

This led to certain achievements of historical science being accompanied by its profound impotence in identifying the “historical” being itself. The historical process was deprived of soul, some basic mystery disappeared, which was given in addition to the legend and remained only dead material of the history, some of its pieces. So this science proved unable to explain the mystery of the religious phenomenon. It revolved around this mystery, but there was no way to know it itself – everything here sort of went out of hand. Then, for example, Berdyaev writes, it became possible to argue that religion is the fiction of priests necessary to deceive people. And only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were prerequisites for real historical science.

According to Berdyaev, the most radical prerequisite of the philosophy of history is that historical reality cannot be considered only as a phenomenon, i.e. a phenomenon of the externally perceived world given to our experience. The history is first of all a special, supreme order reality, some revelation about some deeply internal, treasure original, essence of being. The “historical” is rather a noumenon, i.e. something intelligent, through which it is revealed in a genuine sense, made understandable by the deepest essence not only of the world, but also of a man. History, says

Berdyayev, is a kind of revelation about the fate of a man as the central point of the fate of the world.

Attention should be paid to another important idea of Berdyayev: internal connection, soul of history, as well as the soul of a man, is understood as some reality only in the process of transformation and spiritual knowledge. In this regard, we find it interesting to interpret the human consciousness of M.K. Mamardashvili, who understands consciousness or reason not only as thinking or work of intelligence, but first of all as the concentration of all internal forces of a man, in which it is possible to exceed himself as simply a being of the world around us, "the opening of a man", as S. Khoruzhyi writes about it. In terms of modern European philosophy, this act can be described as "transcendence" or "existence".

For Mamardashvili the "event of consciousness" is fundamentally important, in which an individual, overcoming his "nature", passes into some new state, and according to Socrates, experiences "the second birth". Particularly important here is that the ultimate moral and intellectual effort is not an extension of one's own natural forces; it is not subject to the laws of this world and somehow falls out of the natural cause-effect chain [15]. Most often this condition is called spiritual experience, and having survived it, a man irreversibly changes. However, this is not all: together with a man, his world is changing. In this regard, Troeltsch's words that understanding the present has always been the ultimate goal of history take on a special sound [13].

As G.S. Kiselyov writes, as a result of the spiritual act there is a break of the natural course of things, as a result of which something completely new appears – specifically human reality created by a man. It occurs as if on top of the world around us; before it was gone and, most importantly, according to the laws of this world could not even appear. It was this reality that N. Berdyayev gave the status of historical, calling it a "reality of a special kind" or a "special stage of being" [1]. Thus, in the third, most favorable period for philosophical thinking of history, humanizing the world, a man does not just exist, he, while living his life, creates his own unique destiny.

According to Mamardashvili, only by committing such acts of consciousness, we are really being, living a true life, not being deceived by visions. Only then does a person "stand up", come true, and in this sense any human life is a difficult test, the outcome of which cannot be considered predetermined.

### III. RESULTS

According to Berdyayev, a man is a highly historical creature. There is such profound, mysterious unity between a history and a man that it is impossible to separate them. Just as the history cannot be viewed outside a man, it is impossible to understand a man taking him only in abstract, outside the deepest spiritual reality of the history. Psychology, physiology and other disciplines about a man study him only from separate perspectives, while the philosophy of history takes a man in particular completeness, taken together by the actions of all world forces. For this reason, the subject of historical

knowledge here deals not only with concrete, but also with exclusively individual and unique.

In this regard, Berdyayev's criticism of the so-called historicism, as some general view of culture, which also arises in the Age of Enlightenment, together with the birth of historical science, is interesting. There is no identity between historicism and "historical", but a huge difference and even the opposite, writes the philosopher. In seeking to build the science of history on the model of natural science, they tend to focus attention on recurring historical phenomena while eliminating everything individual. But such a "scientific" theory, which seeks to establish the laws of history, is actually impossible and usually results in empty and dead discipline [16].

The main feature of the whole "historical" is momentariness and uniqueness, and the latest representatives of gnosiology, such as H. Rickert, rightly questioned the very possibility of the laws of history. The greatest difficulty in understanding history, Berdyayev notes, is the mystery of an individual, which, it seems, does not give a reasonable explanation, does not fit into any schemes and overturns any plan. Here it is necessary to follow the path opposite to that which went all-raging historical criticism or generalization-prone historicism. The real path of the philosophy of history is the way to establish the deepest and specific connection between human destiny and history.

### IV. CONCLUSION

Thus, in order to penetrate the mystery of the "historical", we shall first of all understand the history as our own to its depth, as our history and destiny. It is necessary in all great historical epochs to transfer the spiritual destiny, to reveal spiritual past, culture, homeland [1]. Only such a mind, Berdyayev believes, will be true, enlightened and enlightening, able to comprehend the inner light typical for every epoch. Only in this way is it possible to join the inner secrets of the "historical", to discover the greatest spiritual fates of the mankind, to know the historical movement in a real way and to connect their inner individual destiny with the fate of the world history [17].

### V. CONFIRMATIONS

Here it is certainly possible to catch the correlation of Berdyayev's methodological provisions with the thoughts of the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, who writes that the understanding of the complex of impacts formed by the history begins with separate points in which the mutual remnants of the past are connected with each other by interfacing with the life experience of the subject. Life experience understood as experience of the mental process, which is experienced by the subject of historical knowledge under the influence of complex of physical and spiritual influences of its environment, Dilthey calls the pre-cell of the historical world. This experience is not just a means, but it always constitutes an initial prerequisite for the interpretation of the past events. At the same time, the condition of correct understanding of the past is, on the one hand, the stability of this experience in time, i.e. that it is also in every part of the

historical world, and, on the other – that it has universal human significance [2].

The continuity of historical experience is ensured through the understanding of the phenomena of the past, which, according to Berdyaev's younger contemporary, German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, can be considered as a dialogue between the past and the present. And this is not a metaphor: the word can really reach us, and as if it was addressed to us. The statement of this at first glance a strange circumstance happened to us actually means a genuine understanding, and at the same time creates an opportunity for the so-called "application", i.e. the correlation of the content of the perceived text with the specific situation in which the interpreter finds himself.

Here it is important to think about the connotations that Gadamer discovers in the terms "event" and "modernity" that are familiar to us. On the one hand, the philosopher argues that the historicity, i.e. the conditionality of place and time, and therefore the "situation" in which a man finds himself, is the fundamental characteristic of his being. This means that the opportunity to stand up for an over-time, out-of-history subject is nothing more than an illusion of consciousness. In Gadamer's view, however, it would be naive to believe that the historical being can be captured in our usual perceptions of history, as a simple sequence of moments or a line leading from the "past" through the "present" to the "future".

It is difficult for ordinary consciousness to do without the usual separation of what has already happened, i.e. history, from what is happening here and now, i.e. modernity. However, the creature of a historical phenomenon can only open itself when we understand the history as what is still happening, and it is with us. In this sense, modernity (co-timeness, i.e. co-staying in time) can be understood as the co-existence of the past (i.e. what was "then") and the present (i.e. what happens "now") and is described by the term "event" (co-being, i.e. conjoint being). So the existence of a knowing and acting person unfolds through a certain way of his connection with the world, "experience of the history" [4].

Transmission from generation to generation, understood as actualization in the present, provides historical experience with its continuity, which is the tradition itself. Thus, the event, according to Gadamer, is not a point lost in the careless spaces of historical reality, and it is not a place in which the past and the present simply merge together. An event is a way of the past being in the present, or the presence of the history in modernity. True understanding is at the same time the effect of historical experience, or tradition, in which our historical being is rooted. In this case, the interpretation of a text can appear as the moment of its "effective history", and thus the link of "fulfillment of a tradition".

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