

6-2004

Overcoming the Totalitarian Past

Sergey Averintsev

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Averintsev, Sergey (2004) "Overcoming the Totalitarian Past," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 24: Iss. 3, Article 4.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol24/iss3/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.

OVERCOMING THE TOTALITARIAN PAST

by Sergey Averintsev†

IN MEMORIUM

Professor Sergey Sergeevich Averintsev, the outstanding Russian linguist, specialist in literary history and theory, translator and poet, passed away in Vienna on 21 February 2004.

Averintsev was born on 10 December 1937 in Moscow and graduated from the Faculty of Linguistics of Moscow State University in 1961, after which he taught at major universities both in Russia and abroad. His main areas of research were: the Christian tradition in European thought and literature, New Testament literature in light of late classical culture, patristics, medieval Christian hymnography and hagiography, Byzantine literature and philosophy, scholasticism, German Romantic literature (C. Brentano) and Neo-Romanticism (G. Trakl, H. Hesse), Russian poetry (V. Ivanov, O. Mandelshtam) and historical poetry.

Prof. Averintsev, whose books and articles began to appear in the 1960's, was the author of many works on the history of classical, Byzantine, European and Russian literature, the history of theology and philosophy, as well as of translations from ancient Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Syriac, German, French and Polish. His book *The Poetics of Late Byzantine Literature*, published in 1977, became the first monograph in the history of Soviet literary criticism on the works of the Fathers of the Eastern Church. Among his translations are selected psalms, the Book of Job and the Gospels according to Mark and Luke.

Over the past few years Averintsev lived in Vienna, where he was a professor of Slavic Studies at the University of Vienna. In May 2003 he suffered a serious heart attack which put him in a coma for almost 10 months. Shortly before his death Bishop Hilarion of Vienna and Austria, administered to him the Sacrament of Holy Unction.

The first memorial service for him was served on 24 February 2004 in the Cathedral of St. Nicholas in Vienna by Bishop Hilarion of Vienna and Austria, together with Archpriest Vladimir Tyshchuk, the dean of the cathedral, and priest Radoslav Ristic, member of the cathedral clergy.

Before the beginning of the service, Bishop Hilarion read the letter of condolence addressed by His Holiness Patriarch Alexy of Moscow and all Russia to N.

P. Averintseva, in which the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church described the departed as a "man whose entire life was enlightened by the faith of Christ".

Addressing the faithful at the cathedral, Bishop Hilarion shared with those present his memories of the late professor: "Many of us remember the times when the Church in Russia was separated from society, when being a Christian meant challenging society, risking one's position, career and sometimes even one's life. In those years few dared to talk about faith and the Church in a language understandable for the intelligentsia. One of these rare people was Sergey Averintsev. His books were a bridge between the persecuted Church and those who were outside the Church but desired to hear words of living faith about God. It is through his books that many came to know about Romanos the Melodist, Ephraim the Syrian, Isaac the Syrian, John of Damascus and other great Fathers of the Church. In those difficult years when nobody could speak openly about God, he spoke about Him - discreetly, but distinctly enough so that thousands of people came to Christ through his books".

As Bishop Hilarion remarked, Averintsev was a man of extraordinary erudition and encyclopedic knowledge, equally familiar with classical philosophy and literature, German idealism, European literature, Russian religious philosophy and the works of the Greek, Latin and Syriac Church Fathers. "However, the essence of his human and Christian achievements was not in his extraordinary erudition, but in the fact that, as Gregory Nazianzen wrote, having gathered all the intellectual wealth of the East and West, he laid all of this at the feet of Christ".

"It is not by chance that the last book of Sergey Sergeevich, containing translations of patristic texts and published in Kiev, is called *The Pearl of Great Price*", Bishop Hilarion noted. "In the preface to this book His Beatitude metropolitan Vladimir of Kiev and all Ukraine described its author as one 'who, like the Gospel merchant, preferred the pearl of great price of the Living and Incarnate Truth to all the riches of the world'. Once again we remember the words of Gregory Nazianzen: 'Blessed is he who has acquired Christ instead of all the riches of the world'. Such a person was Sergey Sergeevich".

"It is not surprising that he knew so much", Bishop Hilarion concluded, "but that he so abundantly shared his knowledge with many people. He was a man of the Church, a man of true and heartfelt piety. Moreover, he was characterized by a deep Christian humility. And today we pray for him as for a faithful son of the Church, who served many people through his words, preaching and scholarly work".

The cremation of S. Averintsev took place at Vienna's Central Cemetery on 4 March 2004. His ashes, in accordance with his will, are to be buried in the cemetery of the St. Daniel monastery in Moscow.

OVERCOMING THE TOTALITARIAN PAST

Sergey Averintsev

"Vergangenheitsbewältigung", "overcoming" the totalitarian past, is the task that all nations that had to go through a totalitarian experience, theoretically speaking, have to face. But actually not all of them realize the necessity of this process.

One of the morals that can be drawn from the analysis of totalitarian madness is that into utter madness does turn any reasoning system that is uncritical of itself. Cold-eyed self-perception is the most important thing, especially when it comes to criticism.

1. It should first be noted that the very idea of overcoming the past, that is, the idea of systematic criticism of a nation as a whole, in contrast to criticism of the nation's high-rankers, is quite new and has had no parallel in the history of humankind.

Karl Jaspers in his work *Die Schuldfrage* (1946) defined the problem that had never been discussed before - naturally, I do not mean the case of Germany, but the problem of the various grades of collective guilt.

In previous centuries they did not accept the idea that one who executes a command, even if the command does not directly involve killing, is guilty before humankind and oneself, if world public opinion and one's own conscience do not consider this war just. The "usurper" Napoleon could be guilty from the point of view of traditional monarchism, as well as from a more liberal point of view, as an enslaver. But this blame could not really be laid on the soldiers of La Grande Armée. And it was not for nothing that the Russian general Bagration a minute before he was mortally wounded at Borodino shouted "Bravo, bravo!" to the enemies - the French grenadiers who were fearlessly attacking the Russian army. The First World War greatly promoted the development of a system that evoked a systematic assault not only of an enemy nation's ruling elite but also of the whole civilization related to it. Among those who attacked the accused were the great minds of the countries

RELIGION IN EASTERN EUROPE XXIV, 3 (JUNE 2004) page 29.

involved in the war - Thomas Mann on the German part, Charles Péguy on the French part. T. Mann and [G.K.] Chesterton, who were so different in life, resembled each other greatly, proving that it was Germany (or, just the contrary, England) that was playing, in the conflict, the honourable part of keeping the cultural tradition while the opposite party was supporting the dead technological civilization.

Totalitarianism utilized this tendency and encouraged it extremely. Nazis regarded all their adversaries as *Untermenschen*; the Soviets actually considered morally guilty every foreigner who did not try hard to become a "friend of the Soviet Union" and thus wash his guilt away. As for those who were around, totalitarianism tried, by right or wrong, to saddle on each of them responsibility for each of their actions. This was what distinguished it from archaic kinds of despotism, which satisfied itself with blind obedience and did not demand participation in faked elections and demonstrations.

2. We will in no way discredit the moral principle that underlies the idea of overcoming the past if we forebear mythicizing the circumstances under which this idea became a political reality for the first time (i.e. the moment the Second World War ended). That this mythicizing is possible, proves the famous question that some Russian dissidents were asking at the time of the collapse of the Soviet ideology - why not commit those who are guilty of crimes of communist totalitarianism for a Nuremberg trial? One can put such a question seriously only if one forgets the circumstances under which the famous trial took place. The ground for the Nuremberg trial was prepared by worldwide moral reflection, in which "the other Germany" (*das andere Deutschland*), the Germany of emigration and resistance, also took part. The process of reflection was an indispensable precondition. But it couldn't become a reality if it were not for other factors. It was the victory of the Allied Powers (including the Stalinist Soviet Union, in which totalitarianism reached its apogee) that made the Nuremberg trial and the further program of denazification possible.

The case with the Soviet Union was different. The situation that in German is called *die Wende* was caused by a complex set of internal reasons. But anyway, the
RELIGION IN EASTERN EUROPE XXIV, 3 (JUNE 2004) page 30.

role of moral protests against totalitarianism cannot be denied. The protests were so strong that they couldn't be ignored without a new wave of rampant terrorism, which Gorbachev was against. But they also were not strong enough to achieve an absolute victory. The result was a compromise between the Soviet elite and the oppositional part of society, the terms of which were quite close to what Solzhenitsyn suggested in his "Letter to the Soviet Leaders" - we get rid of totalitarian ideology and leave the former leaders at their posts, as a payment for this peaceful and bloodless liberation. We agreed to this compromise, and I still see no alternative to it but a series of bloody catastrophes. But we have to admit that it was neither an external force nor an uprising from below that defeated the former system but the party elite itself. An old moral and juridical axiom says, *pacta sunt servanda* (treaties must be kept).

It is interesting to note that, while remorse of conscience and world public opinion are demanding from Germany and Russia a still further discussion of their own crimes, there are countries from which no one demands anything. Among these numerous countries is Turkey, which has been persisting in denying the fact of the genocide of 1914-1915 and the next years - the massacre that swept off most part of the Armenian population. The recent recognition of this fact by France triggered a violent reaction on the part of Ankara. But generally the world remains silent - everyone needs Turkey as an ally; its admittance to the European Union is being considered. Inside Turkey everyone remains silent as well...

Apparently, not every cultural tradition accepts the notion that a nation should reflect on its collective responsibility for sins and crimes of the past and confess these sins and crimes to the whole world. This idea is either supported by a nation or not. If it is supported, it can be temporally subdued or suppressed but still it continues living its secret life. It is evidently closely related to high appreciation of penitence, which is associated with the Christian tradition. In the famous classification that dates back to Ruth Benedict all this is called culture of conscience. Eastern civilizations pursue a culture of shame - for one thing, one must not lose one's honour and therefore should keep unpleasant secrets to oneself. Modern liberalism now and then prefers a culture of shame as protection against too negative emotions, but evidently enough, the future of Europe's freedom tradition will be conditioned by a culture of conscience.

Naturally, we also often prove ready to forget about conscience and only care about not losing our honour. But we are not able to act like this *bona fide*, as if nothing has happened, and this is what unites us, Russians, with Westerners. I personally have no doubts that this is a manifestation of our common Christian heritage.

3. The program of *Überwältigung* is, inevitably and naturally, thought of as a program of re-education of the masses. But this draws it close to the totalitarianism, which it aims to overcome and which itself presented a project of out-and-out re-education. Holding Karl Jaspers in respect, I still must say that I understand (although do not approve) Ernst Robert Curtius's famous reaction against his pedagogical claim to act as a "*praeceptor Germaniae*" (preceptor of Germany), willing to educate everyone and set everything in their places. Totalitarian experience is an antidote for any tactics incident to educators of the masses.

The distinguished scientist and thinker Karl Kerényi once said that the spirit of abstraction opened doors to national-socialism when Jews as personalities were substituted by the impersonal category of "Jewry" - "to kill Jews" sounds dreadful; "to liquidate Jewry" resembles a description of some logical operation. I am afraid that some of this schematism, which played a fatal role in the past we are trying to overcome, may penetrate into the practice of political education of new generations.

I don't want to predict any gloomy prospects but I am sure that (heaven forbid) if *das radikal Böse* [*radical evil*], that power so shocking to morality comes again, it would not be hard for it to find a verbal mask that would formally differ from any kind of totalitarianism we already know. Our thinking habit prompts us to await something that has already happened, although it was a long while ago that Heraclitus said, "You cannot step twice into the same river." (The fear of restoration of Tsarist absolutism once prevented Russian liberals like Kerensky from seeing the much more fearful autocracy of Lenin, which was approaching them.) One can hardly build a barrier to possible future threats out of ready-made phrases repeated in chorus, out of the casuistic political correctness and the like building material. Today's liberalism is insufficiently liberal; it is deaf to anything that stays apart from

RELIGION IN EASTERN EUROPE XXIV, 3 (JUNE 2004) page 32.

media slogans. But there is only one antidote for a new totalitarianism, and that is a sense of individual responsibility for every word and action, and consequently, distrust of inculcation, of mass suggestion, and of the spirit of abstraction, which Kerenyi spoke of.

4. There are two kinds of dispositions that I consider dangerous for the cause of overcoming the past, and these are sentimentality and cynicism. The following example will for a change refer neither to Russia nor to Germany. Consider the debates on the extermination of Jews in the Polish town of Jedwabne on July 10 1941. This massacre has been thought to be the doing of Nazis but Professor Jan Tomasz Gross from New York now says the Jews were killed by the locals. I am neither a Pole nor a specialist in Polish history, and I do not have a judgement about Gross's thesis, which does not seem reasoned enough. It just grieves me that this conclusion is being used as a disproof of the image of Poland as a martyr country. How can one continue dividing nations into the "good" and the "bad" and moreover claim that only the former deserve compassion after all the attempts to overcome Nazism? If this is not racism, what is racism? How can one shift the blame of those who are to blame to the whole "Polish society"? Were those not Hitlerites who used to reason in this way?

5. What obstacles are there today to the process of overcoming the totalitarian past and dissociation of nations? In my opinion, there are two contrary kinds of them. On the one hand, these are relicts but enduring and militant anti-liberal tendencies of a nationalist and isolationist kind. On the other hand, this is the disposition of modern liberalism, which has taken over the task of re-educating nations, to reduce itself to a slogan, to a primitive gesture, and present these slogans and gestures as our only chance. Gestures are often not only graceless but also silly, giving a chance to those who are against any dialogue. In 1996 representatives of Greenpeace came to Russia to agitate for Russia's nuclear disarmament - a serious problem in every respect. In order to attract young people, they started some indecent dancing which verged on

pornography. Any Russian neo-Nazi or neo-Communist could say at that moment, "Look what dirt they are trying to buy our youth for!"

There have been plenty of such occurrences, and not only in Russia. This has nothing to do with permissiveness or tolerance; this is just the intrusion of a particular way of life upon the whole world. This way of life is presented as a symbol of democratic civilization. One cannot approve the behaviour of the Indian who burned himself in protest against the beauty contest that somehow had to be organized in India at any cost. But one can and should understand him. If it were not for these occasions, neo-Communists, neo-Nazis, Islamic fanatics, and the others would not have any chance. A democrat cannot afford to merely demonstrate his contempt and indignation against a person from the masses when he or she listens to most odious heralds of anti-liberalism, votes for them, etc. We must each time ask ourselves, "How could we permit the situation in which they vote for Tom, Dick and Harry only to demonstrate to us the extent of their dissatisfaction?"

6. It would be useful to keep in mind that each time totalitarianism came to power it was not just a response to a subconscious wish. Totalitarianism was possible insofar as it was an absolutely false answer to quite real questions. And the only way to prevent totalitarianism from coming back today is to be open to questions, to be completely honest and sober, as far as questions are concerned. Exercising in reacting most "properly" to words cannot substitute engrafting intellectual honesty in the minds.

Abridged translation by Olga Yurchenko - as appearing in Europaica No.35 plus light editing by REE editor.