

**S. Kotliarevskii, “War,” *Journal of Philosophy and Psychology* [Moscow] no. 124 (September-October 1914), I-VII.**

We are experiencing a great crisis<sup>\*</sup>, and not just in the immediate sphere in which the war is going on. New relations between states and between nations [peoples] are being created, new foundations for the structure of these states are being laid, and new paths for the development of these nations, but besides all this the intellectual [spiritual] atmosphere in which modern humanity has lived and to which it has become accustomed is changing.

In the worldview of the nineteenth and twentieth century the idea of evolution has occupied a defining place. The history of our planet has been represented as the slow and constant action of forces changing the face of the earth over the course of periods inaccessible to human imagination. The development of organic life on earth has been conceived in a similar manner. Finally in the history of human society such a conception of gradual, continuous, transformative processes has also been established.

It is indisputable that a great step forward has been made here in expanding and deepening the scientific spirit. But as usually happens in the history of human thought, another aspect of the world, with its ruptures, disharmonies, and catastrophes, has remained obscured. But they cannot be thrown out of cosmic history. The same goes for the moral realm. Historicism taught us to see here a continuous chain of infinite adaptations, but left too little room for catastrophe and tragedy. It is as if any manifestation of a great man is not something falling outside the bounds of this slow evolution. The first blows of the storm of war that have broken out over the European world and reverberated throughout the globe have reminded us about these gaps, about these defects in our mental inventory.

The present war is a great, unprecedented catastrophe, and in the face of this the cheering of the war that has been done in recent literature—primarily but not exclusively German—appears monstrous. They have regarded the war as a beneficial instrument of biological selection and a great means of national training, shoring up energy and courage. Proofs in its defense have been advanced from dispassionate exact science, and a vulgarized Nietzscheanism has appealed to this, one for which the superman was supposed to be discovered amid the blood and destruction, amid the zeppelins and dreadnoughts. Our great writers and thinkers, people like Dostoevsky and VI[adimir] Soloviev, did not talk this way about war. In a certain sense they were prepared to defend it, and for them it could be a form of service to their nation and to humankind, a means of fulfilling the evangelical commandment of love, laying down one’s life for another. The moral sense of war, when it is made for law and justice, when evil and violence are deflected by it—these are not its only aims. It is essentially a tragically purifying force. It gives not only the exaltation of a challenge to fate which the poet depicted:

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<sup>\*</sup> “*Velikii perelom*,” i.e. “great break” in the later Soviet context of the launch of the First Five Year Plan in 1928/29.

There is ecstasy in battle  
And at the edge of the murky abyss.<sup>§</sup>

It gives the exaltation of an offering made to something immeasurably higher than the individual life, the exaltation of breaking with the strong bonds that restrain man in the prison of his existence, of his immediate circumstances. Communing with death, man communes here with a kind of higher life, where horror and suffering rise up into a great joy.

But there is another side as well. We feel that modern war is not only a test of the material power of nations: it reveals the value of the cultural principles by which these nations live. And the thought occurs that one could already anticipate at present the approaching reappraisal, the world-historical court.

It is unworthy and shortsighted to lay responsibility for Kalisz and Louvain on German culture in its entirety, as well as to pronounce anathema against German language, literature, philosophy, art, and science. But there can be no doubt that in the culture of modern Germany there are extremely strongly represented tendencies which have enabled the perversion of legal and moral sensibility that has arisen. These tendencies have not remained without trace on the intellectual life of other nations as well, but in lesser degree. These tendencies exalted what might be more accurately designated as the principle of absolute self-assertion, a principle applied in various directions. Perhaps the least dangerous application of it is the cult of the solitary I [viz. "ego"], the absolute assertion of one's individuality at the expense of all others. Least dangerous, because modern man is too deeply immersed in the elemental nature of social relations and dependencies. Rather more dangerous is the similar extreme self-assertion of a constitutive whole, the assertion of a collective egoism, because here the very solidarity of the members of the whole, their readiness to offer themselves in sacrifice to the latter, their moral nature, etc., begins to serve [this assertion].

This relates to the assertion of one's state as an absolute, self-sufficient object to which everything must be sacrificed. Such a relation to the state, which in Hegel's time was still elevated into an earthly deity, was characteristic of German juridical and political science, and its importance as an organization of force was especially emphasized; this state ruled above the law, it limited itself only according to its own will and it mercilessly pursued its objectives within its borders and all the more so in the struggle with other states and nations. Everything must be sacrificed to state necessity, and there are not enough legal guarantees against abuses of references [i.e., appeals?] to it [state necessity]. The absolute assertion of one's nationality, behind which one of them is accorded the preeminent place under the sun, is very close to this. The theoretical justification of a destructive and brutal nationalism issues from this, a nationalism which has already brought so many disasters to contemporary humankind; of course it is also practiced beyond the borders of the German world, but it received its basis here. In aggressive Germanism more than in any other similar tendency one senses the self-confidence of method, one might say of pedantry. The assertion of one's confessional exclusivity along with the complete rejection of any other religious conception closely approaches this, as does putting one's own church structure and church traditions above universal Christian truth, i.e., feelings of

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<sup>§</sup> From Pushkin's "Feast in a time of plague" (1830).

the kind that any clerical intolerance feeds upon. Finally, we cannot bypass the social egoism that has led to the absolute assertion of the rights and interests of an individual social class, however much these rights and interests might themselves have earned attention and protection. Such an absolute assertion is not alien to modern socialism, and especially revolutionary syndicalism, which denies in its name both state and nationality.

If the principle of absolute self-assertion in the political, national, religious, and social sphere leads to destruction and degeneration, then it nonetheless cannot yield place to an opposing exclusivity. Something else promises the renewal of European culture, which looms through the bloody apparitions and nightmares of war. The state remains the organizing power, and it remains at the same time the bearer of great material and intellectual tasks; but it cannot turn out to be a self-sufficient object: it must be permeated by legal principles, and the legal organization of state intercourse is also necessary. Nationality remains a great binding force—war has uncovered the whole depth of the instinct uniting individual peoples with their fatherland, with their nation; it has given examples of the purist, most heroic patriotism, when yesterday's disputes and reprisals are so easily being forgotten. The national is a reflection and embodiment of a common humanity—a fastidiously abstract cosmopolitanism seeks to achieve the second by forgetting the first; but the national cannot be opposed to a common humanity either. Belgium's struggle for its independence is not just a fact in the life of that country, it is a new, beautiful page written in the history of humankind. This spiritualized consciousness and feeling of nationality must take the place of zoological nationalism. Confessions also remain; they are the most powerful bearers of that which has been formed historically, and at the same time of intimate unity and fraternity. But this unity does not exclude the consciousness of the community of religious and moral ideals. One cause is being defended by Orthodox Russia and Catholic France and Protestant England—does not the proximity that has been created open up a new age of more profound and genuine tolerance? The Orthodox and the Protestant experience the destruction of the Rheims cathedral as an offense to their own religious feeling. What is more, before our eyes the gulf has closed which so long and apparently so hopelessly divided Catholic France and secular France: they have found a common language! In the end, class boundaries and class interests remain, the search for a better social order remains, but it does not exclude the unity of all sons of a common motherland, it does not exclude state and national ties; the matter of social reform, the matter of giving laborers and the disadvantaged access to a better life is becoming an object of state and national creativity, and the ideal of a social world based on human dignity is being opposed to the ideal of destructive hatred and internecine war. A renewal not limited to the social-political sphere, a renewal on the grounds of a new religious-moral conception and experience—this is what is opening up before us.

How brightly will these principles be expressed in the new period of European cultural history? How fully will they be embodied in life? Any concrete answers here would be inappropriate. Only signposts can be seen before us, in whose direction this history would seem to be turned as if by the very reason of things. One is completely indubitable: what the European nations have suffered and will suffer cannot go into the past, never to return, without leaving a profound, indelible trace. We understand this from objective consideration of the surrounding world; we sense it even more from a direct inner voice. Have we not all communed with the novel elemental nature of great destruction and great creation and can this communication really be expelled from our soul?

Standing at a great historical watershed, we cannot but feel faith in the future, faith in Russia. Her loving and loyal sons, our brothers, are fighting for this future, for the possible realization of ideal blessings in humankind. This is Russia's mission, and acknowledging this has nothing to do with nationalist claims. One thinks that it would be a fatal mistake to treat the meaning of events in the light of an old, albeit modernized, Slavophilism. Victory over Germanism is not victory over European culture, but its deepening and cleansing. In it and not outside it a liberated Slavic world called to a new life will have its say. We must always value with gratitude those profound and fruitful philosophical and religious thoughts which were introduced by Slavophile teaching into the spiritual custom of Russia, but these thoughts were always bound in it with a kind of insurmountable narrowness of historical scope. Germany, with its tremendous cultural riches, serves us as a warning example of what national egocentrism leads to, and the very crude as well as very subtle forms it can take. The distinctiveness of creative thought of a great nation does not lie in rejection of the spiritual unity that binds nations, a unity which has thus been revealed in the unforgettable days we are now enduring.

Translation: KH