

DOI: 10.37240/TI.2018/9.2.7

## **SELF-LIMITING CATASTROPHISM. RUSSIAN RELIGIOUS THOUGHT AND THE PROBLEM OF REVOLUTION AS UNPRECEDENTED EVIL**

By **SŁAWOMIR MAZUREK**

*The notion of unprecedented evil gained some popularity in the contemporary human sciences, especially in the Holocaust studies. The feeling that certain historical events are the manifestation of exceptional evil, however, isn't something typical for the 20th century or unknown to earlier generations. The French Revolution and the partition of Poland were also perceived in their time as the manifestations of unprecedented evil. The author of the paper gives a concise 'phenomenology' of the experience of unprecedented evil, which includes – as he observes – also an attempt at neutralizing this experience by means of a philosophical, moral or religious explanation. Then he compares four different interpretations of the experience in question: French providentialism, Polish romantic messianism, the historiosophy of the Holocaust constituting the part of political correctness and, eventually, the historiosophy of the Russian Revolution elaborated by Russian religious thinkers in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He claims that while French and Poles tried to discover the hidden meaning of exceptional historical catastrophe and Jews denied it had any meaning, Russians emphasized that even the greatest catastrophes shouldn't be treated as unprecedented evil. This stance – he concludes – constitutes the distinctive feature of the Russian interpretation of the Revolution.*

Key words: revolution, Russia, catastrophe, evil

I

At least three times since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans, or at least a significant part of them, whose voice could not be ignored, recognized the catastrophes they were witnessing as a manifestation of evil incomparable to anything in the past. The French Revolution and the Partition of Poland were perceived in this way by their victims and all those in the Western world who sympathized with them. These days it is commonly accepted that the 20<sup>th</sup>-century extermination of Jews was an eruption of exceptional evil. The Bolshevik Revolution, by which we mean the process of brutal social restructuring in Russia initiated by the coup d'état led by Lenin in October 1917, is usually not enumerated among similar catastrophes. The conviction that it was a crime – or a series of crimes – incomparable with any other event and revealing things about humanity that humans would rather remain unaware of, would be articulated by individuals but it never became

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common nor was it accepted as an obvious truth by any significant fraction of Western opinion. Still, it would be of no surprise to anyone if just the opposite were the case. It is not at all difficult to present arguments for attributing to the Russian Revolution the ominous status of unprecedented evil. It was accompanied by atrocities and acts of homicide almost from the beginning; later, organized homicide became necessary to keep the socio-economic system created by the Revolution working. The most prominent expert in the history of the Revolution, Richard Pipes, claimed straightforwardly that the execution of the Tsar's family was the first act of modern homicide, which means it was an event opening a new, ominous era.<sup>1</sup> Pipes clearly suggests that the 'novelty' introduced by the Bolsheviks consisted in breaking the relation between guilt and punishment. The members of the Tsar's family as well as many thousands of ordinary people were murdered not because they were – be it by the standards of the executioners – guilty of anything but because within the *new social project* there was no place for them.<sup>2</sup> The Bolsheviks, according to the same historian, would exterminate the innocent fully consciously and because they thought it was the most effective means of terrorizing the masses.<sup>3</sup> If the Bolsheviks' methods and mentality have been characterized rightly here, and the whole practice of the exchangeability of the positions of the executioner and his victim that was typical of the Stalinist terror seems to confirm this, then the Bolshevik Revolution was a moral transgression more extreme than Nazi crimes. In the latter case, the Nazis killed people that they considered – in accordance with their criteria – guilty; thus, no matter how faulty from the point of view of the distinction between good and evil their definition of evil was, they did not question the very relation between guilt and punishment, and, consequently, their immoralism was less extreme than that of the Russian communists.

The reasons why the Bolshevik Revolution has not been recognized as unprecedented evil are many and diverse. One of them is related to the responsibility for the evil of the Revolution that – and this is easy to prove – is shared by the Western left and the intellectual circles that supported it. For a long time they did trust the Bolsheviks and obstructed the flow of information about their crimes; they mythologized the gains of the Revolution, and, finally, they supported it directly (in the case of the zealots who managed to enter the Soviet Union: often with a fatal ending). One may come across the opinion that the Holocaust was not a crime against humanity committed by the Germans, but a crime against the Jews committed by humanity. No matter how justified this might be, an analogous opinion about the Bolshevik Revolution – that it was a crime against the nations of the Soviet empire committed by humanity – seems to have more solid grounds. Hitlerism has never had as many advocates in the West as Stalinism had, and an attempt at justifying the Holocaust by means of the arguments formulated by Sartre,

<sup>1</sup> Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), p. 788.

<sup>2</sup> Pipes, *The Russian Revolution*, p. 788, 820.

<sup>3</sup> Pipes, *The Russian Revolution*, p. 820-822.

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Shaw or Romain Rolland in order to justify the Gulag is hardly imaginable indeed. Many more or less direct heirs to that left, who today declare solidarity with it, are obviously not interested in making the truth of its enormous guilt widespread.

Another reason which definitely should not be ignored, even though initially it may appear awkward, is the scarcity of the photographic and film documentation of the Bolshevik crimes. We, people of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, tend to think that whatever has not been photographed did not really happen. In Bolshevik Russia, in contrast to inter-war Germany, a camera, the mythical 'Leica,' was a rare luxury indeed, and the Chekists, even if they had an actual device, definitely would not have photographed themselves against the backcloth of stacks of corpses. That would not only be against the rules they were to obey but also against Soviet man's basic instinct for self-preservation, which made him produce as little material evidence of his actions as possible.

A very important, perhaps essential, reason for *denying the Bolshevik Revolution the status of unprecedented evil* is to be sought, however, in an objection formulated by a few great Russian thinkers against such an interpretation of the Revolution or any other historical event. Despite the fact that historical catastrophes may amount to unprecedented evil not only in the eyes of their victims, it seems reasonable to say that they should first be recognized as such by the very victims. There is something awkward about a situation whereby they acquire the recognition of unprecedented evil when this is clearly denied by the victims themselves. This kind of denial, in fact, is specific for the interpretation of the Revolution, and, more generally, of 20<sup>th</sup> century catastrophes, offered by a few Russian religious thinkers. I will attempt to present their perspective and reveal its originality. For that purpose it is necessary to relate it to the three instances of the experience of a historical catastrophe as unprecedented evil that have been mentioned so far. Prior to that, I will try to sketch *an ideal model of the experience of unprecedented evil*. If it proves useful for the following analysis and makes possible a comparison of the different types of the experience in question we will have obtained evidence of its correctness.

## II

Let us note at the beginning that the phrase *the experience of unprecedented evil* will be used either in accordance with its narrower or broader definition. The former refers to an intuition that a given event is a manifestation of evil that is incomparable with anything that has ever occurred; the latter concerns the intuition itself as well as its rationalization and philosophical-religious interpretations of the event in question. In our considerations – unless stated otherwise – we use the term in its broader meaning.

It is obvious that parts of the experience may but do not have to follow one another in chronological sequence; they may constitute either clear and distinct stages of the whole or its overlapping, nearly synchronous 'strata.' We call them 'nearly synchronous'

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because any rationalization and reinterpretation must be preceded by a primary intuition. In accordance with countless literary statements and personal documents, such an intuition is not an arbitrary assumption made for the sake of some speculations, but rather something that really occurs. A rationalization of such an intuition is not an attempt to justify it – the intuition is irresistible enough not to require a justification – but rather a means of making it accessible, at least partly, to others. Thanks to rationalization, which transforms the original intuition into a better or worse supported thesis, the intuition ceases to be something purely subjective and becomes communicable inasmuch as it loses the irresistibility of an indirect insight. A manifest naivety or a bias characterizing many arguments that are put forward in the phase of rationalization does not signify dishonest intentions. Supporting arguments do not have to be methodologically flawless because they play merely an auxiliary role in communicating to others some truth of great importance, which originates from a direct, lived experience rather than from rational deliberation. Confrontation with unprecedented evil, however, is an experience so depressing and traumatic that there arises a need to neutralize it at least to some extent by means of a philosophical and religious explication of the events in which the manifestation of unprecedented evil was noticed. The final stage, the essence of which rests in searching for the meaning of the events, is an attempt to repress the intuition that initiated the whole experience.

This is the way one may describe the complete experience, taking into account its components and the way they are interrelated. In some cases, as we shall see later, some of these may be reduced or skipped, the reductions and omissions remaining, obviously, always meaningful.

Exceptional evil may be considered systematically only as something that happens to a *historical subject* (a nation, a state, religious community, civilization or, finally, humanity as such). In other words, only such a subject may be confronted with this kind of evil. It has never occurred that evil done to a single individual, no matter how cruel, be considered publicly as evil that overshadows all other instances of evil. (Needless to say, Christ was not an individual human being, but – and this makes a difference – Logos incarnated.) Shestov might consider killing Socrates a hideous crime and evoke this example many times in his writings, but he never claimed that nothing equally evil happened ever after. On the contrary, he emphasized repeatedly that a confrontation with extreme evil, which turns human existence and the world into an absurd, is an experience that sooner or later becomes universal, one that everybody has their share in.

The reason why only a historical subject may be thought of as a victim of unprecedented evil should be sought in the necessity to compare the event that we consider as an instance of such an evil with the past as a whole, or, in other words, the need to see the event on the background of the past. This is, strictly speaking, impossible as long as our knowledge about the past is problematic and incomplete; we may, however, still hope that we do possess sufficient knowledge in reference to historical subjects, while

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the absurdity of similar hopes in reference to individuals is more than obvious. In every moment we have at our disposal a certain holistic vision of grand history, i.e., the events in which historical subjects are actors, no matter how simplified, distorted or controversial this may be. Nothing of this kind can be claimed about single human existences that have been born, are experiencing evil and are being consummated by time. While there is a universal history of mankind, a universal history of individual human beings has been – so far – beyond our reach.

Is also the very experience of unprecedented evil - as described earlier and in the meaning assumed by us here - reserved for a historical subject? Experience in its narrower meaning, the primary intuition of confronting *summum malum*, a subjective feeling that an evil unique of its kind has happened to us definitely is not. Most of us have experienced the depths of despair directly. It is often accompanied by a conviction that one has fallen victim to exceptional evil, even if this conviction is not something essential to despair (which is debatable). That is why an attempt to comfort a despairing person by evoking others who are in despair in order to make relative the person's suffering and the evil that has happened to them is doomed to failure. This is not the case, though, with the experience of unprecedented evil in its broader meaning. Even if it cannot be said to be rigorously restricted to a historical subject, such a subject is definitely more prone and susceptible to it than a single individual. We have said that rationalization is part of the experience that interests us in its broader meaning and, as we have noted, unprecedented evil may be considered rationally and coherently mainly in reference to a historical subject. Although rationalization itself does not have to be methodologically perfect, it does not have to be perfectly *rational*, it does constitute a significant limitation.

Still, it is not the only reason why a historical subject claiming that it has fallen victim to *summum malum* is much more credible than an individual making the same claim. A single person presenting themselves as a victim of an unparalleled evil would be immediately accused of an egotist exaggerating of their own suffering. A historical subject narrating their own experience is not equally susceptible to accusations of subjectivism. A historical subject is at once a collective subject, whose ontology is a problematic issue, which remains open, and, in consequence, the principle of identity pertaining to such a subject is weaker. Every claim about its experience is a claim made by some individuals that form this subject and - rightly or wrongly – claim the right to represent it. The statement made by these individuals does not have to be (and often is not) a report about their personal experience. As a statement of an individual about others it gains an aspect of objectivity, remaining at the same time – as long as these individuals belong to one community – an auto-referential statement. Thus, a historical subject turns out to be both a victim to and a witness of evil, and in some other cases – the victim and perpetrator at once.

This tight connection between the experience of unprecedented evil and historical subjects helps to understand the relation between the experience in question and

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modernity, which we have already mentioned here. Its absence in the pre-enlightenment era may be accounted for with reference to the influence of Christianity, which is based on the belief that *summum malum*, the crucifixion of God incarnated, has already occurred. Modernity stands not only for the weakening of the influence of Christianity but also the intensification of historical consciousness, the spectacular manifestation of which is the increasing significance of the philosophy of history at the price of the shrinking of some other philosophical areas, including the philosophy of being. In history, which is all the more often the main subject of reflection, one tends to search for harmony and order, both of which used to be sought for in the universe or in the structure of being. Also the distortion of harmony – i.e., evil – must manifest itself in a historical dimension rather than, as it has been so far, in an ontological or moral sphere. The presence of evil is experienced as the presence of evil in history and the presence of evil in history – as the emergence of unprecedented evil. *A modern, deeply historicist consciousness replaces the fall that precedes history with the summum malum that happens in history.* The fact that actually only a historical subject can be thought of as a victim of unprecedented evil, in alliance with typically modern historicism and orientation toward historiosophy, does not necessarily lead to this conclusion – there is no logical connection here – but it does privilege it. While modern consciousness may experience the presence of evil, also in history, in many ways, the one we are talking about here is the most typical one; even though it is not an inevitable result of the tendencies of modernity, it definitely is their creation, unknown in earlier times.

III

One may debate whether the first of the cases of unprecedented evil that we will consider before looking at the Russian case, being the most important case for us, does not contradict, to an extent, what we have established so far. De Maistre, who articulated the experience of the (French) Revolution as unprecedented evil specific for the French conservatives and advocates of the *ancient regime* is, better than anyone else, known as a staunch opponent of the Enlightenment and, consequently, as one may add, of modernity. To this charge one should reply that it does not imply that de Maistre himself was not part of modernity. He was part of it and was influenced by it just as all the later enemies of modernity inspired by his thought until these days have been. His historiosophy remains in an easily detectable relation with Bossuet's rigorous providentialism of over a century earlier; but mentally de Maistre belongs to a different world: he knows that the 'eternal' social order is not incontestable or guaranteed once and for all and that because of the Revolution it became problematic, which means that the consciousness of de Maistre is much more decisively marked by the sense of being historical than the consciousness of his predecessors, including Bossuet.

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The exceptional, incomparable criminality of the French Revolution is for de Maistre something obvious and irresistible at first sight. Many a time does he claim *expressis verbis* that revolution is the crime of crimes, while his tone and his evident emotional engagement exclude a possible suspicion that we are dealing with a display of rhetoric here, even if its impeccable form might prompt us to do so. 'Now what distinguishes the French Revolution and makes it an event unique in history is that it is radically *bad*. No element of good disturbs the eye of the observer: it is the highest degree of corruption ever known; it is pure impurity.'<sup>4</sup> The passage evoked, one of many similar in 'Considerations on France', is nothing other than an expression of the experience of unprecedented evil in its narrow meaning. When it comes to its rationalization, de Maistre indicates two crimes, each of which is, in his view, a violation of divine and human rights so extreme that their very occurrence is a sufficient reason to recognize the Revolution as unparalleled evil. The first is regicide, a repugnant murder committed on the sovereign by the whole nation; the second – the attack on the Church and religion, which had something in common with an act of collective apostasy and endowed the Revolution with an evidently satanic aspect. De Maistre's proposed interpretation of historical catastrophe recognized as unparalleled evil is of a religious-philosophical kind and its essence and the most specific trait at once rest in a combination of providentialism with an extreme anthropological and historiosophical pessimism. According to de Maistre, man is an essentially evil creature, predestined by his own corrupt nature to commit crimes. The evidence of this is history itself – a chain of unimaginable atrocities and massacres, among which the Revolution may stand out but is not contrary to historical norms. At the same time, this bloody chain of human history remains under the control of Providence; it is, then, only a mask hiding a providential order: crimes are punishments bestowed by Providence and their victims often are wrongdoers who deserve their lot. In this order the Revolution is a punishment for the sins of the old regime and, at least from a certain moment, also a punishment for the crimes that took place in the earlier phases of this very Revolution. It is exceptional in that it is an intervention of Providence that is particularly perceptible, almost tactile, as evidenced by numerous coincidences, fatalisms that could not be avoided, and even by the very scale of evil. For de Maistre it is a proof that the Revolution foretells a great transformation of the world, a rejuvenation that will be accompanied by the reign of a new religion or rebirth of Christianity. The neutralization of unprecedented evil in his historiosophy occurs by placing the evil in a universe which is at once evil and under an absolute control of Providence, and by recognizing it as an announcement of an epoch-making transformation as a result of which the Universe will become a little less evil.

For the experience of unprecedented evil shared by Polish romantics and then Polish people as a whole in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the perspective of Mickiewicz is even more

<sup>4</sup> Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, trans. R. A. Lebrun, (Cambridge: University Press, 1994), p. 38.

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representative than that of de Maistre for the French conservatives. In some respects, by way of digression, Mickiewicz appears to be a perfectly symmetrical antithesis to de Maistre. While the latter sees radical evil in the French Revolution and hopes for a control of the chaos that it brought about through the restoration of the monarchical order in a new Christian era, the former sees the order of the ancient regime as the source of evil that led to the Partition of Poland. The pre-reflective, spontaneous feeling that it is a crime having no match in history, richly evidenced by Polish romantic literature, finds its rationalization in the thesis about the unprecedented nature of the Partition as an attempt to kill a nation. Nobody has managed to express it better than Krasieński – inspired by Mickiewicz, not Mickiewicz's equal as a poet but his match as a thinker – in the introduction to a poem 'Przedświt' [Daybreak]. 'A child is he who speaks that it is a political crime – it is a much deeper crime, for it is religious, going beyond the secular sphere to the divine circles – to destroy a State created by man, by his desires it would be a political crime; but to dissolve a holy nation and to wish to kill it while the realization of the idea of humanity on earth cannot be complete without this nation is a crime against the divine truth, eternal truth, it is a sacrilege indeed!<sup>5</sup> A historiosophical-religious reinterpretation of the Partition of Poland, which was meant to neutralize the feeling that it was *summum malum*, is to be found in Mickiewicz's messianism, which, depending on the interpretive aspect we choose to focus on, either emphasizes the redeeming meaning of the suffering of Poland, or highlights its historical mission as a nation-carrier of the idea of freedom. In the former case, the suffering of Poland is endowed with a higher mystical meaning; in the latter – the fact that Poland fell victim to extreme evil is recognized as the source of moral duty that makes the whole nation responsible and equally each and every single member to fight against evil, at least political evil, wherever it appears. In any case, the Partition of Poland always turns out to be the apogee of evil, which ultimately serves the victory of freedom and facilitates the coming of the era of a universal brotherhood of peoples.

Both varieties of the experience of unprecedented evil in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – the Polish and French – described here were 'complete' in that they contained all the elements of the ideal model. This is not the case with the 20<sup>th</sup>-century examples we are now going to discuss. At this point we withhold from answering the question as to whether this difference tells us anything essential about both centuries.

One of the characteristics of the experience of the Holocaust as unprecedented evil is the scope of this experience. The feeling that it was a culmination of historical evil is not only common in our civilization but also, from a certain moment, constantly present. It is a truth that on the one hand is beyond any debate and on the other is constantly repeated and recalled as if it required unceasing reconfirmation. While the French Revolution was considered as the apogee of evil by a handful of conservatives, separated from other people, who observed the revolution at least with interest, and the Partition of Poland by

<sup>5</sup> Zygmunt Krasieński, *Dziela literackie*, ed. P. Hertz, vol. 1, (Warszawa: PIW, 1973), p. 150.

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the victims themselves and partly by the progressive European opinion, the Holocaust came to be considered exceptional evil by the overwhelming majority of the people in the West. Consequently, it became overgrown with an enormous number of interpretations, of which the one that became the component of political correctness is considered as representative for the contemporary experience of Holocaust as unprecedented evil. It entails all the claims about the Holocaust that can be declared publicly without any justification, and the negation of which is considered unacceptable independent of the justification provided. The original intuition that the Holocaust was *summum malum*, which found expression in countless reports and works of art, is rationalized by way of indicating that the Holocaust was the first attempt in history to exterminate a whole nation, which was the end in itself, and one not serving any further purpose. The fact that this standpoint, if understood literally, gives rise to many questions and proves contrary to the beliefs that are fundamental for our civilization, at least as undisputable as the thesis about the exceptionality of the Holocaust (to mention just a few - why would killing a nation be worse a crime than killing a single person? Why should a crime serving another purpose be a lesser evil in comparison with an 'aimless' crime?) only confirms our conviction about the predominantly persuasive nature of the rationalization of the experience of unprecedented evil in its narrow meaning. Differently than in both the cases we have discussed, here one does not proceed from a rationalization to interpretation meant to neutralize the original intuition by inscribing exceptional evil into a broader historiosophical or religious schema which makes it 'explicable' and 'meaningful'. In contrast to that, such procedures are immediately and unconditionally condemned as a relativization of the Holocaust. One can hardly imagine the indignation caused by a possible attempt to neutralize – in the way de Maistre did by recognizing the victims as guilty, or Mickiewicz did by claiming that the victims have extraordinary moral obligations towards others – the original intuition that the Holocaust was unprecedented evil. The most striking feature of the experience of the Holocaust as unprecedented evil (or, more precisely, the experience of unprecedented evil starting with the recognition of the Holocaust as *summum malum*) is giving up any historiosophical-religious neutralization of the primary intuition, which hides the effort to preserve this intuition in its original form unmitigated by time or reflection, and – as far as it is possible – to convey it to others.

The experience of the Bolshevik Revolution as unprecedented evil seems in this context highly peculiar, mainly because, in point of fact, it never took place. Independently of the above mentioned circumstances that favour the recognition of revolution as such an evil, only a few of the thinkers writing about it were ready to perceive it in this way; the others either refrained from formulating similar conclusions or warned about formulating them.

Unprecedented evil in the Revolution was definitely noticed by Vasily Rozanov (1856-1919), one of the most original writers and thinkers of the first phase of the Russian religious-philosophical renaissance, and Marian Zdziechowski (1861-1938), a Polish neo-

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romantic pessimist, remaining under the strong influence of Russian thought. Rozanov made revolution the main, if not the only theme of his famous work 'The Apocalypse of Our Times.' He gathered in this eccentric text, being an apocrypha, a diary, and a series of political polemics at the same time, motives present in his earlier books, and presented the Revolution not as a historical catastrophe but as a historical episode of a cosmic catastrophe. According to Rozanov, the Russian Revolution is the end of a long term process of the destruction of the human world, civilization and even the universe by Christianity, the hallmark of which is the opposition God-nature, an acosmism manifesting itself in the condemnation of sexuality.

Christianity, which ignores nature and does not recognize the rights of the body – in contrast to paganism, which understood human needs well – could not become a solid foundation for societies. Not only did it disintegrate them – the two millennia of Christendom formed an era of 'permanent revolution,' unending social unrest and upheavals – but also led to the atheisation of humanity. In a long turn it is impossible to remain loyal to a religion that is contrary to nature; thus, humanity turns away from Christianity and because displacing paganism was followed by the attributing of the features of Christianity to religion as such, breaking with Christianity meant breaking with religion in general. Such a deep disorder in the human world must influence the state of the universe, part of which is man, in which case a revolution foreshadowed not only the end of the current social order and civilization but certainly also the end of the universe: an overwhelming implosion of being. Rozanov would often succumb to the pessimism of his own prophecies and, deprived of hope, was awaiting a catastrophe that would engulf him along with the whole universe. Sometimes, though, he would momentarily switch into an extreme optimism and, in accordance with the rule *credo quia absurdum*, would assume that the turmoil he was witnessing preceded not an apocalypse but rather a regeneration of the world along with the rebirth of cosmic paganism.

Marian Zdziechowski, in his turn, was not bothered by similar episodes of optimism, particularly not in the 1930s. Shocked by the scale of the Bolsheviks' crimes and appalled by the Soviet utopia, which in his view was a bestial undertaking aimed at creating a new human being not only deprived of individual features and totally disciplined but also one prone to cruelty, Zdziechowski openly called the Revolution a literal manifestation of demonic powers. Gradually he would become deeply convinced that by bringing to light the evil deeply hidden within human nature, the Revolution finally discredited humanity, which, by the way, was not to be praised for the former, exceptionally unjust, social order. Revolution proved, in his view, that the history of mankind ended with the victory of evil. The pessimism of Zdziechowski's diagnosis, which in its most extreme version may perhaps be compared only to some nihilistic interpretations of the Holocaust, could be mitigated only by introducing an eschatological perspective, a belief that God would soon put an end to the scandal of human history and the earthly reality so that the triumph of the good might occur in a different realm of being. At the end of his life, however,

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Zdziechowski, as evidenced by his private correspondence (he never declared it publicly), lost religious faith and along with it – any eschatological hope.

Nevertheless, the belief that the Russian Revolution was unprecedented evil was criticized by the most prominent Russian thinkers. The most famous of them, Nikolai Bierdiaiev, was of the opinion that social revolutions were phenomena known in history since time immemorial, so just another revolution could not be considered an unparalleled event. Evgenii Trubetskoi (1863-1920) expressed similar views about historical catastrophes in general, highlighting at the same time that they always have beneficial consequences as they facilitate the outburst of creativity and religious revival. Historical upheavals help rid us of the illusory values which we attach ourselves during periods of stability; the Russian Revolution was another upheaval of this sort, one comparable with the Peloponnesian War or the turmoil in the era of Renaissance. The most subtle argument against the claim that revolution is unprecedented evil and at the same time against searching for this kind of evil in any historical event, was formulated by a leading representative of the philosophy of pan-unity, Semyon Frank. The idea as to the exceptional nature of evil we are confronted with was, in his view, a relic of a progressivist belief in the epistemological superiority of modernity over the whole past, whereas this superiority was no more guaranteed by the fatalism of progress, by way of which we are always closer to the aim of history than our predecessors, but by an initiation that is accessible only for us in the form of meeting *summum malum*. Both strictly progressivist and extremely catastrophist models of history are wrong, even though both hide a grain of truth. To a limited extent and in some areas progress is possible; meanwhile we are threatened by a catastrophe, which, however, cannot be ultimate because creation is indestructible by way of its inherent divine element – the light shining in the darkness of St John's Gospel.

Russian thinkers tried to suppress the intuition which gives birth to the experience of unprecedented evil before it ever comes into being. Their objection against the absolutization of historical evil was not always so evident and so well supported as in the case of Frank, but it definitely was voiced more often by these thinkers than by others. This motive is original enough to be recognized as a feature specific to the Russian diagnosis of the Revolution. Is its presence related to any important inclination within Russian religious thought? To answer this question, let us evoke another question that we formulated in this paper and yet left unanswered. We asked whether the fact that the 20<sup>th</sup>-century experience of unprecedented evil is 'incomplete' when compared to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century one adds something to our overall understanding of both centuries. It surely does. The difference tells us something about the 19<sup>th</sup>-century trust in the philosophy of history and about the loss of this trust in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The 19<sup>th</sup> century operates with philosophical strategies allowing one to – at least to some extent – endow with meaning even unparalleled evil and mitigate the trauma of encountering it. The 20<sup>th</sup> century either disowns these strategies or preserves them but in a reduced form and with a number of reservations. This is attested to by the difference between the reactions to

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the Holocaust and to the Russian Revolution described here by us. The consequences of both resolutions, however, turn out to be paradoxical. The recognition of the Holocaust as absolute evil, in connection with the definite rejection of a neutralizing, historiosophical reinterpretation seems at first to be an act of breaking with the illusions of historiosophy that modernity is capable of; however, if Frank's critique is correct, it is merely a relic of one of the most dogmatic varieties of historiosophy. The perspective of the Russians, which – at least because of the involvement of religious elements – seems to preserve more of the historiosophical heritage, ultimately turns out to be a more nuanced and successful attempt to disentangle these illusions. An effort to break radically with the philosophy of history leads to the conservation of its residue, while preserving some of its elements allows for the liberation from its most delusive schemas. Still, the refusal to absolutize historical evil does not indicate insensitivity to the presence of evil in general – it is perhaps the last thing one might accuse Russian thinkers of. By refusing to identify the Revolution with unprecedented evil they oppose the aforementioned, specifically modern tendency to historize evil, while the canonical historiosophy of the Holocaust fits perfectly into this tendency, just as Polish messianism and the providentialism of de Maistre do.