



IVAN ILYIN: EXILE AND PATRIOT

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The Russian philosopher, writer, and publicist Ivan Ilyin lived abroad for more than thirty years. However, along with Nikolai Berdyaev and Lev Shestov, he became one of the iconic Russian philosophers of the first half of the 20th century.

Becoming a Philosopher

Ivan Ilyin was born in Moscow on March 28, 1883. His father was a nobleman, a godson of Emperor Alexander II, a solicitor of the Moscow Court Chamber, and his grandfather was an engineer who built the Moscow Kremlin, where he later lived with his family.

Ivan was the third son in the family. Both of his brothers were lawyers and the young man could not deny his father's wishes. A "golden" graduate of grammar school, he entered not the philological department, as he wanted, but the law faculty of Moscow University. By this time, the 18-year-old Ilyin knew German, French, Latin, Greek, and Church Slavonic.

At university, his brilliant education continued. Ilyin's teachers were the prominent religious philosopher Prince Evgeny Trubetskoy and the eminent philosopher and jurist Pavel Novgorodtsev. The latter recalled the student: "Ilyin displayed an absolutely out-of-the-ordinary capacity for work, coupled with the greatest devotion to his chosen specialty. He did not need to be induced, but had to stop in his studies, fearing for his overwork from excessive work." Plato, Rousseau, Kant and Hegel were the ideological centers of Novgorodtsev's school. It was Hegel who turned out to be the most important philosopher in Ilyin's life—he devoted many scholarly works to him.

Ivan Ilyin's scientific career began in 1910. He became a member of the Moscow Psychological Society and published his first scientific work, *The Concept of Right and Power*. At the end of the year, Ilyin with his wife went on a scholarly trip to Germany and France. There he studied the latest currents of European philosophy, including philosophy of life and phenomenology, and according to some sources, even had a meeting-session with Freud. Ilyin entered this expansion of his world and the new stage of his discipleship with excitement: "Sometimes, anticipating, I grit my teeth with a writing appetite. In general, I think and think about so much that in moments of fatigue or decline, I seem to myself a fool."

In 1913, Ilyin returned to his homeland for the last time. Renewed, established in his own strength, he consolidated his reputation as a young scholar, a brilliant lecturer—his classes were always packed, and adoring students even dedicated to him an epigram:

"You can dispel all spleen."

Associate Professor Ilyin.

At the same time, armed with new knowledge, Ilyin became even more ruthless toward his opponents. "Ilyin's ability to hate, despise, and insult his ideological opponents was exceptional. And it was only this side of him that the Muscovites got to know," recalled Eugenia Herzek.

Ilyin never accepted Soviet power. He wrote: "Socialism by its very nature is envious, totalitarian and terroristic; and communism differs from it only in that it manifests these features openly, shamelessly and ferociously." These views were formed in the philosopher quite early; but if he perceived the February Revolution as a temporary disorder, he regarded the subsequent October Revolution as a complete catastrophe.

Ilyin's confrontation with the young Soviet state was quite open. He supported the White Army in print and even financially, and, according to investigators, was a member of its southern association, the "Volunteer Army," and was in charge of the Petrograd branch. Immediately after the Bolshevik coup, Ilyin published an article entitled, "Gone to the Winners" in *Russkiye Vedomosti* (*Russian News*). In it, he addressed the White Guards who had fallen in the struggle: "You have won, friends and brothers, and bequeathed to us, to bring your victory to an end. Believe us, we will fulfill your will."

On February 22, 1914, Ilyin made a presentation on "Hegel's doctrine of the essence of speculative thinking." It began a series of six papers that made up the work, *Hegel's Philosophy as a Doctrine of the Concreteness of God and Man*.

This scholarly work is still considered one of the best commentaries on Hegel's philosophy. In it, Ilyin criticized the inability of the "rational concept" to subdue the "irrational element" of the empirical world. The dissertation made Ilyin famous as a world-class philosopher and was for a long time his last publication in Russia, and one that ultimately saved his life.

Ilyin was first detained in April 1918. Already by then, the outcry caused by the arrest of the Doctor of State Sciences, lecturer in the History of Law and Encyclopedia of the Law Department, was significant. It went so far as to say that many of Ilyin's scholars and colleagues in the department demanded that they be taken "hostage" just so that the philosopher himself could be released. The case ended with an amnesty.

By 1922, Ilyin had already been arrested six times. And the sixth would have been the last—after his arrest, he was immediately convicted and sentenced to death by firing squad. At that time under investigation were more than 200 people—all creative intellectuals. The Soviet regime could not afford to liquidate such a number of "golden minds." Lenin himself understood the inconceivability of shooting Ilyin. "It is impossible. He is the author of the best book on Hegel," he wrote, referring to the philosopher's dissertation. So, it was decided to replace the execution with a mass expulsion to Europe, which went down in history as the "philosophers' ship." Trotsky summed up: "We expelled these people because there was no reason to shoot them, and it was impossible to tolerate them."

Those deported were allowed to take only two pairs of underpants, two pairs of socks, a jacket, pants, coat, hat and two pairs of shoes per person: all money and other property, including extensive libraries, were subject to confiscation.

On September 29, 1922, the steamship *Oberburgermeister Haken*, the first of the two "philosophers' ships," set sail from Petrograd. Its passengers included the philosophers Berdyaev, Trubetskoy, and Ilyin.

Berlin and the Second Exile

The first thing Ilyin did upon his arrival in Germany was to contact General A. von Lampe, a representative of Baron Wrangel, whom he held in great respect. Wrangel reciprocated: "Many, spiritually weary by the hard years of exile, lose faith in the moral necessity of struggle and are seduced by the idea of the sinfulness of 'violence,' which they begin to see in active opposition to evil. Your book will open their eyes." The White general was referring to the work, *On Resisting Evil by Force*, in which there are such quotations as:

"In calling to love one's enemies, Christ was referring to one's own personal enemies. Christ never

called to love the enemies of God who trample on the divine."

Many émigrés were less enthusiastic about Ilyin's radical new pathos. Zinaida Gippius called the book "military field theology;" and Nikolai Berdyaev observed that "Cheka" in the name of God was more repugnant than "Cheka" "in the name of the devil.

In Germany, Ilyin organized the work of the Religious-Philosophical Academy, a philosophical society attached to it, and the religious-philosophical publication, *Russkiy kolokol* (*Russian Bell*), which had the characteristic subtitle: "Journal of the Willful Idea." In addition, the philosopher began work at the Russian Institute of Science, where he became Dean of the Law Faculty. In 1924, Ilyin was elected a corresponding member of the Slavic Institute at the University of London. In short, his public life in Berlin was almost more intense than in his home country. Ilyin, like many passengers on the ship *Oberburgermeister Haken*, did not disappear into the streams of emigration, but made public in the European cultural field a new Russian ideological platform, previously unknown to Europe.

However, the clouds were gathering over the philosopher—fascism had come to Germany.

Ilyin's attitude toward fascism changed in the same way as his attitude toward the Russian revolution: from underestimation of the threat to extreme aversion. Initially, the philosopher saw in the emergence of a new radical doctrine a natural, albeit forced, measure. According to Ilyin, fascism emerged "as a reaction to Bolshevism, as a concentration of state and security forces to the right. During the onset of left-wing chaos and left-wing totalitarianism, it was a healthy, necessary phenomenon." Ilyin found the racial theory itself (he was an ardent opponent of anti-Semitism) and the anti-church struggle to be unsympathetic aspects of the doctrine.

However, the Nazi system itself was far less favorable to Ilyin. Immediately after Hitler came to power in 1933, the philosopher came into conflict with the German propaganda ministry. As a result, Ilyin was fired from the University of Berlin. A ban on teaching followed. This was followed by the banning of all his printed works and a complete ban on public speaking. The philosopher was left without means of subsistence.

The new blow from his "stepmother" country, Ilyin took painfully: "What a terrible time has fallen to our lot, that to scoundrels, complete liars and shameless men the ways are open, and to us—a stream of

humiliation." In July 1938, Ilyin was forced to leave Germany and move to Switzerland. He looked to the future without optimism: "When an egg is broken it either pours into a glass or into a frying pan. I feel that the egg is broken, but I don't see either the glass or the pan."

A Third Attempt to Get on with Life

The attempt to re-establish his life, for the third time, began bleakly. In Switzerland, they did not want to grant Ilyin the right of residence and even tried to send him back to Germany. Only the personal intervention of the composer Sergei Rachmaninoff, who agreed to contribute 4,000 francs to the writer's "boarding house," eased the matter. Nevertheless, the Swiss authorities immediately stipulated a condition—a ban on any political activity. Ilyin was humiliated; he was aware of his role and fate as a martyr: "If only to tell," Ilyin wrote to Sergei Rachmaninov in August 1938, "how many times people have cheated and betrayed me, it is a whole martyrdom. For—I will tell you quite frankly and in confidence—my soul is not at all created for politics, for all these tenacious intrigues.

The philosopher and his wife settled in the Zurich suburb of Zollikon. The new life took place in a different capacity for Ilyin. An orator, lecturer, publicist, organizer, and ideologue, he spent more and more time in seclusion and, deprived of the opportunity to publish, began to write away. These years saw the creation of the most extensive part of Ilyin's literary and philosophical heritage.

At the end of his days, the philosopher wrote: "I write and put aside—one book after another and give them to my friends and like-minded people to read... And my only consolation is this: if Russia needs my books, then the Lord will save them from destruction, and if neither God nor Russia needs them, then I myself do not need them either. For I live only for Russia."

Hard work daily and frequent illnesses exhausted the philosopher. On December 21, 1954 Ivan Ilyin died. A monument with an epitaph was erected over his grave in Zollikon:

*Everything has been experienced
So much suffering.
Before the eyes of love
There are sins.
Little has been achieved.*

Thanks be to you, eternal blessing.

Coming Home

Ilyin's archive was preserved by his students and associates. In 1965 it was taken from Zurich to the United States by Nikolai P. Poltoratsky, a student of philosophy and professor of Russian language and literature at the University of Michigan. This was in accordance with Ilyin's will—he bequeathed to keep his archive abroad "until the Bolshevik regime in Russia is over." However, the philosopher's journey to his homeland was a long one. The publication and analysis of Ilyin's writings were completely banned in the Soviet Union. Only at the end of Perestroika, in the era of glasnost, did works devoted to Ilyin's activities begin to appear. But the publication of his works was still out of the question.

In October 2005, the ashes of Ilyin and his wife, Natalia Vokach, were moved to the Donskoe cemetery in Moscow. Next to the philosopher are buried the writer Ivan Shmelev and the White general, Anton Denikin, communication with whom was an important part of his life abroad. And in 2006, Ilyin's archive returned to his homeland. It was brought from the U.S. to Russia and transferred to the philosopher's alma mater, Moscow State University.

The 100 boxes of the archive contain manuscripts, photographs and the philosopher's personal library. Here are found unique epistolary materials: correspondence of Ilyin with the famous Russian composer Nikolai Metner, writer Ivan Shmelev and White Army commander Peter Wrangel.

Digitization of the archive took over four years. Today, 27 volumes of Ilyin's collected works have been published. Quotes and texts from them are widely used as assignments for the school Uniform State Examination; they can be found in the speeches of state officials. On June 15, 2012 the first monument to Ivan Ilyin in Russia was unveiled in Ekaterinburg.

Denis Spiridonov writes for Kultura. This article appears through the kind courtesy of Culture.ru.

Featured: *"The Thinker" (portrait of Ivan Ilyin), by Mikhail Vasilyevich Nesterov; painted in 1921.*

