

ATHEISM

By Alexandre Kojève, translated by Jeff Love, New York: Columbia University Press, 2018

THE BLACK CIRCLE, A LIFE OF ALEXANDRE KOJÈVE

By Jeff Love. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018

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While global media were grappling with the smoke and mirrors of Russia's meddling in elections and referenda in 2018, both in the 'free' and not-so-free worlds, cold war spies were headline news in France for an entirely different kind of intervention.

In the archive of documents that came under the scrutiny of Bulgaria's Dossier Committee, Julia Kristeva, code name Sabina, was identified as one of more than fifteen thousand intelligence recruits who worked closely with an appointed agent in Bulgaria's equivalent of the KGB.¹ The Kristeva scandal broke in April and then gradually fizzled out as the attention of the French press turned to retired counter-intelligence agent Raymond Nart's

1 Jennifer Schuessler and Boryana Dzhambazova, "Bulgaria Says French Thinker Was a Secret Agent. She Calls it a 'Barefaced Lie'," *New York Times*, April 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/01/arts/julia-kristeva-bulgaria-communist-spy.html>; Richard Wolin, "Was a Renowned Literary Theorist Also a Spy? The Strange Case of Julia Kristeva," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 20, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Was-a-Renowned-Literary/243719>; Dimeter Kenarov, "Was The Philosopher Julia Kristeva a Cold War Collaborator?" *New Yorker*, September 5, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/was-the-philosopher-julia-kristeva-a-cold-war-collaborator>.

first-hand account of his life-long obsession with Kojève, chief negotiator of France's foreign economic policy in the fifties and sixties, and famed philosopher of the end of history. Nart's desperate manhunt, his repeatedly failed attempts to have Kojève cornered and interrogated, ended on a deflationary note when the latter dropped dead in Brussels in 1968.²

If Kristeva's spy allegations sent shockwaves across the circles of French theory, and were considered as an implicit indictment of the historically established incompetence of the DST (France's directorate of territorial security), Kojève's case is an entirely different story.³ The DST had been building up a dossier on Kojève's involvement with the world of intelligence and the Stalinist state since the early nineteen eighties and the so-called Farewell Dossier.⁴ The regurgitation of this same old story in the 2018 spring issue of *Commentaire* proved to be quite the showstopper in an otherwise bland collection of disgruntled and disaffected essays about emerging global threats, economic uncertainty and the failure of the idea of Europe. In the same issue, a prominent headliner and one of the journal's regular contributors, Francis Fukuyama, is once again explaining and updating his end of history thesis. Amidst this chorus of Hegelian beautiful souls, and rather worryingly, Nart's piece refers to Kojève with his Russian name 'Kojevnikov' and appears to be desperately fanning the flame of

2 Raymond Nart, "Alexandre Kojevnikov dit Kojève: Un homme de l'ombre," *Commentaire* 1. 161 (2018): 129-228. Nart's allegations have been published, almost word for word, more than ten years ago in Eric Merlen and Frédéric Ploquin, *Carnets intimes de la DST: 30 ans au coeur du contre-espionnage français* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), 191- 216.

3 Robert Maggiori, "Un K à part" *Libération*, November 20, 1997.

4 All this was a decade before the defection of KGB archivist Vassili Mitrokin to the UK in 1991, and the fabricated information in the welcome pack handed out by General Mihai Caraman to two DST officials at the end of their visit to Bucharest in 1992. In these two documents, Raymond Nart came across a reference to a 'white Russian' and 'a philosopher' and speculated that these were code names for Kojève. If Raymond Nart's investigations came to nothing as they were mostly based on inconclusive evidence, he was, nonetheless, instrumental in leaking his 'white Russian' or 'Schlawer' hypothesis to the French and British press almost periodically, at the rate of one story every decade or so.

foreignness that is now consuming not only Kojève's philosophical and political legacy, but more broadly perhaps casting a McCarthyist shadow over former cold war intellectuals in exile. It is a curious fact that in the autumn of 2018, and right in the midst of this mess, a monograph on the Russian origins of Kojève's thought and an English translation of one of his early Russian manuscripts appeared in print. In light of the state of things today, what is to be made of these two new additions to the Kojevian corpus?

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As is well known, in a series of seminars between 1933-1939 on Hegel, Alexandre Kojève, who was at the time in his early thirties, turned the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* in Paris into a theatre of mass disruption. Every Monday and Friday, around 5:30pm, Kojève would read out, translate and paraphrase selected passages from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* with a charming Slavic accent before an audience of A-listers, who were, reportedly, mesmerized and blown away by the performance of the young Russian.

Picture an audience of artists and poets, philosophers and psychologists, orientalist and anthropologists, mathematicians and physicists, ordained priests and Jesuit Fathers, an Egyptian couple, and Japanese Heideggerians, among many others. Also in the gallery were the future French ambassador to Moscow, future high-ranking diplomats and civil servants in global trade and finance, and even a mysterious, unidentified, heavily decorated military officer. Russian scholars have recently pointed out the overlooked attendance and active participation of Russian exiles in Paris.⁵

Kojève's dramatic rendition of Hegel was first and foremost designed for the entertainment of those elites. Years later, and long after he abandoned academia, Kojève evoked the unsatisfactory experience of speaking before a post-war democratic lecture theatre. In a packed auditorium, with students at his feet,

5 Dimitri Tokarev, "Les Auditeurs russes 'inaperçus' (Gordin, Tarr, Poplavskij) du séminaire hégélien d'Alexandre Kojève à L'Ecole pratique des hautes études 1933-1939" *Revue des Etudes Slaves*, 88.3 (2017), 495-514.

he felt alien to a gathering worthy of his contemporary Jean-Paul Sartre, because no matter how provocative he tried to be, every word he said was written down with exemplary demure and apathy. No one objected and no one protested.

Kojève's 'translation' of Hegel was intentionally scripted as a provocative narrative, which was not intended for mass consumption. For almost eight decades now, the lectures have been popularized as the narrative of a dramatic struggle between masters and slaves. As masters wither away, the working slaves, it is erroneously believed, will triumphantly bring history to an end, to then live happily ever after in the universal and homogenous state of equal citizens.

The main plotline of the lectures on Hegel, and contrary to what is commonly believed, was not so much about the end of history or Marx's *Reich der freiheit* [kingdom of freedom] as it was about the struggle for recognition that pits a philosopher against a tyrant. Hegel is the philosopher who understood and justified Napoleon's historical action. He heard the tyrant's cannonballs loud and clear, and the least Napoleon could do was to acknowledge the German philosopher and summon him to join his army of civil servants and special advisors. But Hegel's wait was in vain. Kojève presented Napoleon's failure to reciprocate Hegel's recognition of the tyrant as the central drama of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the key to making sense of the philosopher's famed hypochondria. At the height of the Moscow trials, Kojève would raise the provocation up a notch by drawing a parallel between Napoleon's historical failure to reciprocate Hegel's recognition and what is at stake in declaring himself Stalin's consciousness. Will Stalin recognize Kojève?

Throughout the 1930s, Kojève hammered in the minds of the intellectual and political elites who flocked to his seminar the difference between *doing* philosophy in the company of tyrants and *being* a philosopher in the tranquil safety of the garden of Epicurus. As the Second World War was drawing to a dramatic close, he turned his back on the theatre of French academic philosophy, and was already producing important policy papers, some of which

appeared unsigned in print. Calling off his Stalinist challenge, he is now recognized on the exclusive stage of high diplomacy, international trade and post-war reconstruction.

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The so-called end of history thesis, Kojève’s claim to fame and the shore against which many intellectual expeditions on the intriguing Russian-French philosopher have come to crash, appears to be the central text in Jeff Love’s *The Black Circle: A Life of Alexandre Kojève*. While it is not often advisable to judge a book by its cover—as the adage goes—*The Black Circle* is a serious challenge to this established piece of wisdom. The title’s allusion to Kazimir Malevich’s famous painting, reproduced on the cover of the book, anticipates the gradual and systematic blotting out of Kojève by the “foreign doctrines”⁶ of his Russian predecessors.

The book seems to state the obvious, albeit overlooked, fact that Kojève was, and had remained throughout his life, Russian in thoughts and feelings. Unfortunately, the author’s endeavour to underscore his subject’s Russianness was made in the spirit of Nart’s amplification of the foreign resonance of ‘Kojevnikov’, more than in the spirit of acknowledging Kojève’s contribution to contemporary thought in the course of his intellectual and political career in his adoptive country.

Sandwiched between Dostoyevsky’s “rogue gallery”⁷ of misfits, Federov’s laughable “mad philosophy of universal resurrection”⁸ and Soloviev’s “outlandish”⁹ man-god, Jeff Love reduced Kojève’s entire philosophical project to a “monstrous site of death.”¹⁰ This strikingly selective intellectual genealogy appears to give the author license to see the *Life of Alexandre Kojève* through a bleak and sinister lens. Dostoyevsky, Federov and Soloviev, all do

6 Jeff Love, *The Black Circle: A Life of Alexandre Kojève*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 163.

7 Ibid., 71.

8 Ibid., 90.

9 Ibid., 99.

10 Ibid., 289.

indeed have something in common: they all glorified “the will to self-annihilation or self-immolation.”¹¹ But Jeff Love tells us that Kojève was instrumental in radicalizing his Russian predecessor’s revelling in individual suicide by promoting a philosophy predicated on and terminating in “collective madness.”¹² Given this lens, it is tempting to read Love’s biography against itself and in light of the sort of propaganda that Kojève himself was so familiar with. Alongside his widely popularised polemic with Strauss on the subject of propaganda, perhaps lesser known is his short review essay of Jesuit priest Gaston Fessard’s book *France, prends garde de perdre ta liberté* [France, Beware of Losing your Freedom].¹³ Speaking against the unhealthy atmosphere of paranoia stirred up by the demonization of French communists as ‘bad’ citizens, as ‘nasty’ and ‘dangerous people’ who are putting the freedom and security of decent hard-working folks in jeopardy, Kojève notes that like all works of propaganda, Gaston Fessard’s book was “telling the truth, nothing but the truth, but not the whole truth.”¹⁴ Propaganda, Kojève notes, does not need to ‘invent’ another reality; in fact, it does not need to invent anything. It simply abstracts one fragment of reality to then present it as the reality of all realities.

The Black Circle may well be a fragment of the truth about Kojève and his life, a work of propaganda *à la Fessard*; a work whose author, like the followers of the Jesuit Fathers in France and Belgium before him, appears to be sounding a cautionary note to all those who may fall under the spell of Kojève’s thought.¹⁵

11 Ibid., 79.

12 Ibid., 167.

13 Coincidentally, Raymond Aron’s 1979 book *In Defense of Decadent Europe*, trans. Stephen Cox (London: Transactions Publishers, 1996), was originally titled “Europe, Beware of Losing Your Freedom.”

14 “On dit la vérité, rien que la vérité, mais, on ne dit pas toute la vérité,” Alexandre Kojève, “Christinisme et Communisme,” *Critique* 3-4 (1946), 308-312.

15 This line of thought extends from Bernard Hesbois’s unpublished thesis “Le Live et la mort” (Université Catholique de Louvain, 1985) to Shadia Drury’s *The Roots of Postmodern Politics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994) and Stefanos Geroulanos’s *An Atheism that is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010).

According to the author of *The Black Circle*, Kojève is not only a Stalinist, but “one far more radical than Stalin himself,”¹⁶ and since he “stands for the rejection of the modern liberal tradition ... self-interest ... self-preservation,” following his thought entails “march[ing] forward to our own self-cancellation in a society that resembles a ghastly or ghostly collection of cadavers from which all life has ebbed.”¹⁷ These are, of course, bald claims to make, but it is unfortunate that when he set out to validate them, the author lost his footing and tumbled into Kojève’s “suffocating”¹⁸ and “eccentric”¹⁹ post-war writings with their forbidding “scholastic technicity.”²⁰ In the end, the author chose to stay too close to the safety of those works’ titles and their opening chapters. He then concluded that the volume on the philosophy of right is “the formal, legal groundwork for the Stalinist state,”²¹ while the volumes on classic Greek philosophy are all sheer play, nonsense, and mindless repetitive gibberish. “What we have before us,” Love concludes, “is a remarkably divided body of work. One may refer to that division as ironical ... as inconsistent, or even farcical.”²²

Like numerous authors before him, Jeff Love departs from a foregone conclusion that the lectures on Hegel have literally and irrevocably declared history closed with Napoleon marching on Jena. That assumption led many critics, often doubling up as biographers, to put forth naïve speculations about the enormous amount of unpublished manuscripts that Kojève produced between 1939 and 1968. Why did Kojève carry on writing after he declared history closed in his lectures on Hegel? Many critics resolved the matter by dismissing those works as post-historical play procreated by an intellect trapped in the ironist’s cage.²³ *The Black*

16 Love, *The Black Circle*, 259.

17 Ibid., 276-77.

18 Ibid., 247.

19 Ibid., 232.

20 Ibid., 237.

21 Ibid., 222.

22 Ibid., 289.

23 This is the main thesis of Michael S. Roth. See for instance his *Ironist’s Cage: Memory, Trauma, and the Construction of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

Circle is the latest addition to that same line of thought. Under-scoring Kojève’s intellectual filiation with Russian ‘madness,’ and unable to make heads or tails of “the ghastly visions of the end of history,”²⁴ Jeff Love concluded that:

Kojève offers two radically opposed alternatives: a continuation of the nonsense of history that heads nowhere and achieves nothing ... or a history whose aim is to cancel itself out in a final end that frees human beings from the otherwise nonsensical muddle that history must be in absence of a definitive end.²⁵

Such a reading is symptomatic of two difficult issues that readers of Kojève have been faced with. The first difficulty has something to do with our inability to locate fragments of his writings in his mysterious system of knowledge. The second difficulty has something to do with the unresolved biographical puzzle of his radical and sudden change of career from academic philosophy to politics. Our inability to make sense of Kojève’s political action echoes our inability to make sense of his philosophy.

Since *The Black Circle* claims to be aimed at the general public, it is important to point out the set of concerns it poses for post-truth societies. Firstly, this book appears to have indulged in a rather irresponsible treatment of the theme of suicide in the context of a global mental health epidemic. Secondly, it seems to be attributing irrationality, madness and self-immolation to all things Eastern. These two prominent themes in the book should not go unchallenged.

The Black Circle contends that Kojève’s work “promotes an essentially totalitarian political vision”²⁶ according to which “the certainty of servitude is preferable to the uncertainty of freedom.”²⁷ This is a brand of “philosophical Stalinism”²⁸ that

24 Love, *The Black Circle*, 190.

25 Ibid., 203.

26 Ibid., 279.

27 Ibid., 280.

28 Ibid., 10.

“beckons us toward freedom from freedom.”²⁹ When he intersects Russian literary fiction with Kojève’s philosophy around the theme of ‘madness’ and ‘nonsense’ masquerading as “radical desire for emancipation,”³⁰ Jeff Love deploys the same argument to underscore the vacuity and foreignness of emancipation narratives that came to us from the East.

In the final analysis, Kojève’s Russianness is framed as an interference with “European thought,”³¹ a distant echo of the corrupt ideas festering in the build up to, and immediate aftermath of the “nascent Soviet Union of the 1920s.”³² More disturbing perhaps is the author’s taking too much liberty with imputing madness, self-immolation, suicide and nonsense to Eastern and ‘Asiatic’ thought. We are in “the circle of Eastern conceptions of mindless or intentionless action ... a point where thought can no longer be aware of itself ... a kind of automation.”³³

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If in *The Black Circle* Kojève was cast as “a clever ironist” and a “dogmatic Hegelian,” in *Atheism*, he is believed to be “deadly serious.”³⁴ *Atheism* is a fragment from an unfinished book project. It was written between early August and mid-October in 1931. First translated from Russian by Kojève’s life-long partner Nina Ivanoff and her sister, the text appeared in print in 1998 against the backdrop of what were by then widely publicised allegations that Kojève was a Soviet mole. In 2007, a Russian edition of the

29 Ibid., 280.

30 Ibid., 32.

31 Ibid., 163.

32 Ibid., 276.

33 Ibid., 201. On few occasions, the author hints at other ‘Eastern’ connections such as “Buddhism and the Wu Wei” (Ibid., 201). Such statements are based on inadequate familiarity with Indian and other variants of Buddhist philosophies, and an equally flawed understanding of the influence they exerted on different aspects of Kojève’s philosophy.

34 Jeff Love, “Introduction: Atheism and Politics” in *Atheism by Alexandre Kojève*, trans. Jeff Love (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), xiv.

text was included in a volume of collected works prefaced with an introductory essay by neo-Eurasian academic A. M. Rutkevich, marking the symbolic re-appropriation of Kojève by readers from his native Russia. The publication of Jeff Love's translation in 2018 coincided with Raymond Nart's autobiographical account of the low-stakes game of hide-and-seek he played with Kojève for almost two decades.

If the publication of those different translations of *Atheism* was repeatedly upstaged by spying allegations, detracting from any serious engagement with its intellectual significance, the fault does not entirely lie with tabloid sensationalism or an obscure intelligence plot in which Raymond Nart continues to play a central role. A fragment known to Kojève's biographers, commentators and translators since at least the early 1990s, *Atheism* had been, from the outset, framed with unsympathetic readings, perhaps in part due to its strong 'Eastern' resonances. The prefaces to the Russian, French and Italian translations, all concurred in labelling the text a piece of religious philosophy where an 'early' Kojève was trying to find a 'path towards God' before his sudden conversion to the dark side of Hegelianism. The introduction to the English translation is a continuation of the theses put forth in *The Black Circle* on Kojève's "Russian roots,"³⁵ and the failure of all emancipatory narratives because "no attempt at liberation from the world is possible."³⁶ Such speculations about the purpose and content of *Atheism* could not be further from the truth.

To begin with, readings of the manuscript as religious philosophy or as negative theology do not hold in light of Kojève's premise that the theist and atheist 'intuitions' are outside religion, and that their "dispute ... is logical, psychological, ontological, etc., but in no way religious."³⁷ Not only is this dispute "actually ... outside religion," but more importantly "religiosity must be to

35 Jeff Love, "Introduction: Atheism and politics," xi.

36 Ibid., xxv.

37 Alexandre Kojève, *Atheism*, trans. Jeff Love (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 10.

some extent independent of the problem of God.”³⁸ There is an “extra-religious” religious attitude, one where not only something, but also the “nothing [can] function religiously.”³⁹

The theist-atheist doppelganger is very much akin to a heuristic device reminiscent of, but not exactly the same as, the *Lectures*’ master-slave dialectic. In *Atheism*, the theist-atheist dialectic initiated Kojève’s reflection on a systematic articulation between ontology and phenomenology, (given) being and (empirical) existence, where another aspect of the cognition (of objective reality) can be engaged beyond the two possibilities set forth in Hegelian logic.⁴⁰ This problem can make sense only when the scholarship on Kojève sheds some light on his mysterious philosophical system. In the meantime, the reader of *Atheism* can make a more informed judgement regarding the widely exaggerated influence of Heidegger on Kojève’s philosophy. Rather than repeating Heidegger or even relying exclusively on his terminology, as the translator’s note contends, Kojève’s sporadic references to the 1929 lecture ‘*Was ist Metaphysik?*’ are amplified by the strong Russian resonances of the intellectual tradition which *Atheism* is partly in conversation with.

It is neither the ‘nothing’ of the atheist nor the ‘something’ of the theist taken separately that matters. Rather it is the nothing-something (nothing *given as something*), and the something-nothing (something *given as nothing*), that are constitutive of the something-ness [*nechtost*’] of something-*other*. This is not exclusively Heidegger’s *Nichtung*, but something else, perhaps close to the something-*other* depicted in Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Towards a Philosophy of the Act* (1919-21) as ‘otherwiseness’ [*inakovost*’]. At the extreme end of

38 Ibid., 11.

39 Ibid., 14.

40 The question for Kojève is how to grasp both the ‘fact’ and ‘form’ of being. see. Ibid., 4. In Hegel’s logic, still according to Kojève, the latter is impossible, as the philosopher will have to settle for the deduction of ‘all attributes of [being] from the concept of being,’ but when encountering ‘non-being’ as one of those attributes of (pure) being, we are already engaged in thinking ‘becoming’, thus losing sight of the initial task of grasping the form as well as fact of being. Ibid., 129.

this argument, there is the restitution of our sense of community with self, with others and with the world, which is also a question that occupied Russian thought, mainly via Soloviev and the early Slavophil philosophers of the nineteenth century. This is the notion of *Sobornost*’ or communality. *Atheism* partly resonates with this debate; it alternates Bakhtin’s ideal of outsidersness with Soloviev’s ideal of communality, difference and identity, homogeneity and heterogeneity, ‘familiar closeness’ and ‘terrible strangeness.’

Kojève is exceptionally good at layering his knowledge of Russian philosophy and thought with a tangled web of intellectual undercurrents, which span eastern and western thought, classic and modern philosophical traditions, including the latter’s continental and analytic variants. *Atheism*, like almost any other fragment from his oeuvre, engages a wide spectrum of research specialisms across different subjects, broadly converging onto one fundamental question: why is there something rather than nothing? Should philosophy and science occupy themselves with non-existent entities that have no corresponding ontic status in traditional ontology?

Non-being, the non-existent, and the doctrine of non-things are rooted in the founding texts of Western ontology, namely via Parmenides and Plato’s *Sophist* as well as the Hellenistic school of Stoicism and the school of Pyrrhonism, which are given a great deal of attention in Kojève’s post-war writings. Another thread lends itself to interesting comparative readings with Husserl’s discovery of categorical intuition, Brentano and Whitehead, but also the theorizing of intentional objects in the work of Austrian philosopher Alexius Meinong. *Atheism* is contemporaneous with Husserl’s 1929 *Paris Vorträge* [Paris lectures] on the *Cartesian Meditations*, which were published in French translation in 1931 thanks to Emmanuel Levinas and Alexandre Koyré. Around the same time, Kojève was intensively engaged with debates around the crisis of modern physics, and studying mathematics at the Sorbonne and with a private tutor. These and many other threads attest to Kojève’s familiarity with ancient and modern Western philosophical tradition, and anything beyond this tradition continues to be overlooked in the critical reception of his work.

There is, however, another ancient context where the concept of the non-existent (*Abhava*) was discussed in different schools of Hindu philosophies of knowledge. Kojève is particularly attentive to this line of thought in extended footnotes across the text. Beyond Meinong's jungle and his homeless non-existent entities, Hume's golden mountain, "centaurs and quaternions,"⁴¹ " $\sqrt{2}$, or a square circle,"⁴² Hilbert's infinite hotel, Dirac's sea or Cantor's set theory, *Atheism* will take the reader on a journey across terrifying, weird and out-worldly spaces reminiscent of Pushkin's *Ruslan and Liudmila* (1820) where "on footpaths no one has explored/ are tracks of beasts no one has seen."⁴³

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Biographical accounts are useful in shedding some light on the context in which *Atheism* was written. Kojève's fortune was wiped out in the 1929 stock-market crash. Around the same time, he contracted a rare and incurable illness from which he never recovered. Two years later, he was divorced, never to marry again; but it will not be long before he learned of his Jewish ex-wife's short-lived marriage to a civil servant of the Third Reich, and then of her suicide in Berlin. Kojève was apparently well aware of his ex-wife's mental health, and he prevented many of her suicide attempts when they were together. It is quite possible that he had to live with the guilt and sadness of Cecile Shoutak's tragic end. In short, the bleak overtones of Kojève's writings in the beginning of the 30s did not escape the notice of biographers who identified in the aforementioned sequence of historical and personal events the roots of cynical and nihilistic tendencies in their subject's character and thought.

41 Alexandre Kojève, *Atheism*, 16.

42 Ibid., 136.

43 Alexander Pushkin, *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, trans. Roger Clarke (Surrey: Alma Classics, 2005), 5. Jeff Love appears to be unaware of this translation or of the provenance of the quote, which he renders as: "there on unknown roads there are the tracks of unseen beasts" (Ibid., 134).

Biographical fetishism aside, it is worth noting that in 1931 Kojève was in desperate need of validating his German degree to secure an academic job in France. Therefore, he had every compelling practical reason to work on his French and German publications instead of writing a Russian text to discuss atheism. There appears to be a similar pattern in his unpublished manuscripts, namely, a mysterious sense of urgency to write in Russian at the most inconvenient time possible. Unlike his writings in French or German, Kojève's Russian manuscripts seem to be directly addressed to the people of Russia and to a future generation of readers in his country of birth. This leads us to a pertinent comparison with Dostoyevsky's "Atheism." During a stay in Florence, Italy in 1868-69, Dostoyevsky revealed in letters sent to close friends and family his plans to resume work on what he described as "his testament, the summit of his writing career,"⁴⁴ stressing that the book could not be written in Europe because its primary material had to be derived from Russian reality. Was Kojève's *Atheism*, which was written barely a few years after its author settled in Paris, a Russian or a European book?

Contrary to Jeff Love's nihilistic theses, there are important textual references to Dostoyevsky other than the ones he cites in *The Black Circle*, which are conducive to a more composed and productive reading of Kojève. Dostoyevsky's literary and sociological reflection on suicide was an open critique of atheism and its affiliated social utopia. He believed the act to be more suitable "in the kingdom of the devil on earth" where stone is turned into bread and all material needs are satisfied. In Dostoyevsky's view, it is precisely in such utopia that one must expect a severe outbreak of the epidemic of suicide, because "where everything has been done and there is nothing more to do ... people would be overcome by boredom and sickness of heart."⁴⁵ Taking our bearings from Dostoyevsky's belief that a book on Russian atheism must be writ-

44 Jacques Catteau, *Dostoyevsky and the Process of Literary Creation*, trans. Audrey Littlewood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 231.

45 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *A Writer's Diary*, trans. Kenneth Lantz, ed. Gary Saul Morson (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 118.

ten in Russia, it is important to identify the intended addressee and geopolitics of Kojève's *Atheism*.

Nikolai Berdyaev's psychological study on the theme of suicide, which was directly aimed at Russian exiles in Europe, was coincidentally written and published in Paris the same year as *Atheism*. It is unfortunate that this important text does not get a mention in *The Black Circle* and its lengthy discussion of the theme of suicide in Russian literature. Berdyaev's *On Suicide* (1931) displaces the 'epidemic of suicide' from the (pre-revolutionary) social utopia of Dostoyevsky to a post-revolutionary Russian diaspora united in a shared condition of suffering caused by 'Bolshevik evils.' Berdyaev's suicidals are radically individualistic, cut off from the comfort of home, estranged from their national identity, and subjected to the hardships of material need. The booklet is an instruction manual on 'how to survive revolutions' from the standpoint of theism; it condemns suicide as double transgression of the divine laws of eternity and the temporality of human order. On a subjective psychological level, the act of suicide, in Berdyaev's view, reflects 'effeminate' hopelessness and 'unmanly' weakness of character.⁴⁶

Although *Atheism* can be read as a critical antithesis of Berdyaev's moralism, it is primarily a book concerned with the question of method in the context of Kojève's own philosophical system in outline. Positing that suicide is, philosophically speaking, the ultimate expression of a paradoxical free act that puts an end to freedom; Kojève set out to deduce from this act the notions of negativity, opposition and difference that erupt between being and non-being, existence and the non-existent, the real and the un-real, thought and the un-thought. For Kojève, this in-between is not the sphere of an extra-ontology, as it is the case for instance with Meinong, but something situated within, and constitutive of, objective reality. Already at this point, we can see Lacan's shadow

46 *Atheism* is written in the first person, and makes direct references to the author's philosophical meditations. The rather ill-informed decision of Jeff Love to use 'feminine pronouns throughout' although 'in Russian all of these pronouns are grammatically masculine,' resulted in a disfigured text, and one which is very remote from what its author intended for it to achieve.

lurking in the background of this line of thought, not least because while Kojève was writing his Russian manuscript on the ontology of the non-existent in the summer of 1931, Lacan was composing a poem, precisely on the *hiatus irrationalis*.⁴⁷

The ontology of the *hiatus irrationalis* can be partly located in the current of ideas that broadly developed around Weimar philosophers' attempts to theorise an adequate method for understanding history. Early in the twentieth century, this was precisely the debate that concerned Weber's reflection on the irrational character of empirical reality and the problem of method entailed in applying concepts to a fragment of this reality. Rickert and Emile Lask brought this *hiatus irrationalis* into the method of doing social science research.⁴⁸ There is no doubt that Kojève, who studied with Rickert in Heidelberg, was familiar with these debates in the late 20s and early 30s. Neither 'extra-ontology' nor meontology (as in Hindu philosophies), neither the homogeneous and spherical being of Parmenides nor ontotheology (in the Kantian sense of the term), the Kojevian "*hiatus irrationalis*,⁴⁹ which is characteristic of "the gulf between the worldly and the 'otherworldly,'⁵⁰" is a pivotal articulation in 'the philosophy of the non-existent.' Partly outlined in *Atheism*, this articulation is an essential constitutive element of Kojève's system of knowledge.

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We live in a world of extreme polarisation in politics, in lifestyles

47 Jacques Lacan, "Hiatus irrationalis" *Le Pahre de Neuilly*, 3/4 ([1929] 1933).

48 For Rickert, the *hiatus irrationalis* shows how historical knowledge depends on the irrationality of reality. See Heinrich Rickert, *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural Science: a logical introduction to the historical sciences*. Trans. Guy Oakes (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986). The "early" Husserl argued against Rickert and the neo-Kantians' theses on the irrationality of reality, and used his phenomenological method to close up the "hiatus" between the intelligible and irrational in the *Umwelt*.

49 Ibid., 55.

50 Ibid., 109.

and tastes; the world of square circles and alternative facts. “The fate of our times,” as Weber famously observed, “is characterized ... above all, by the ‘disenchantment’ of the world.”⁵¹ In an uncanny way, *Atheism* ripples through *The Black Circle*, displacing the disenchantment of the latter into the “swamp”⁵² of the former. What *The Black Circle*’s “Russian context”⁵³ lacks in Russianness, it makes up for in generalizations of the Russian character. The book seems unmistakably symptomatic of the current perceptions regarding Russia’s illicit geopolitical interventionism in the affairs of Western states. At first, the book remains hesitant as to whether Kojève was “a progressive thinker, a Marxist, or a jocular misanthrope, a sort of Mephistopheles, or both.”⁵⁴ Ultimately, the author settles for ‘Christian apologist,’ and ‘*a modern day Judas*’ as his *final word on Kojève*. It is quite puzzling that after reaching this rather bald conclusion, Jeff Love went on to translate *Atheism*, a compendium of the very ‘foreign doctrines’ which *The Black Circle* had all along denounced as being incommensurable with Western ideals.

Many of Kojève’s commentators who slighted his work and sought to exorcise their unhealthy fascination with his philosophy, later went on to double up as his translators. Jeff Love is neither the first nor perhaps the last instance of these puzzling cases of intellectual inconsistency. What is one to make of this bipolar approach to Kojève’s legacy? Perhaps the answer to this bewildering riddle can be found in Kojève’s preface to Bataille’s *A-Theological Sum*: “if there is only one possible way to say the truth, there are countless ways to silence it [for oneself].”⁵⁵

51 Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (1949; London: Routledge, 1970), 154.

52 Alexandre Kojève, *Atheism*, 76-77.

53 Jeff Love, *The Black Circle*, 6.

54 *Ibid.*, 177.

55 Alexandre Kojève, “Préface à l’œuvre de Georges Bataille” *L’Arc*, 44 ([1950] 1971), 36.