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World History as Revolution: Boris Porshnev and the Experience of Dialectical Defeat

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Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive presentation of the most remarkable engagement with the intellectual genre of world history in the Soviet era — the hitherto unknown project Critique of Human History by the famous Soviet Marxist thinker Boris Porshnev. Porshnev's synthesis of negative dialectics and historical materialism transposed the negativity

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of revolutionary defeat in Stalinist Russia into a radical teleological perspective, which conceived of world history as a single, cognitive and political, revolution. The article presents multiple institutional, cultural, and ideological contexts from the Soviet period that pertained to Porshnev's experience of revolutionary defeat, argues for the crucial importance of the historical approach in appropriating the intellectual legacy of the Revolution, all the while highlighting the relevance of Porshnev's thought for present-day discussions in philosophy, anthropology, and history.

Keywords

Porshnev, Russian revolution, world history, philosophy of history, historical materialism

Anyone can feel sorry about history. Its destruction, the process of Communism — that is the happiness for which humanity strove ever more strongly over the course of the preceding millennia [...] One will be happy, to the extent that he will participate in this movement, and unhappy to the extent that he will not [...] There are no other criteria for “good” and “bad” and there should not be.

Boris Porshnev

Multiple actors involved in the making of the Russian revolution considered it to be an event of “world historical”² significance. As simple as this statement may seem, it calls for a reconsideration not only of the place of October 1917 in world history, but of the challenge that it posed to the understanding of both “world” and “history,” concepts firmly embedded within Western narratives of development and progress. Themselves steeped in the teleology of Western superiority, the victorious Bolsheviks saw their triumph as an inevitable conclusion to the sequence of European emancipatory upheavals, initiated by the French Revolution. However, neither the place nor the circumstances of the Russian Revolution made these neat linear projections plausible — the explosion of the revolution in a backward peasant country on the Eu-

² “World-historical” is a literal translation into English of the Russian adjective *vsemirnoistoricheskii* (roughly corresponding to English “global historical”) which was used at the time by the actors to describe the event of revolution.

ropean periphery was nothing short of an anomaly. For those participating in the construction of the new revolutionary world, it constituted a defiant leap into unknown political and conceptual territory, a leap accompanied by, and inseparable from, an attempt to rethink and rewrite world history along alternative, non-bourgeois, and non-Western lines. The ecstatic redefinition cited in the opening of this text of happiness as Communism being the very destruction of human history did not, however, arise in the first postrevolutionary decade of radical social, intellectual, and aesthetic experiments. It was penned in secret by historian and philosopher Boris Porshnev in the midst of Stalin's counterrevolutionary retreat, when the writing of world history was institutionalized within the structures of the formidable Soviet Academy of Sciences, and its methodological ambition reduced to the ideological function of justifying the position of the USSR as the "avant-garde of humanity" (Lukin 1937: 19). Indeed, the very trajectory of the writing of world history in Soviet Russia encapsulates the paradoxes of the revolution's institutionalization and the dialectical cycles of revolutionary advancement and retreat. Porshnev's unfinished project, *Critique of Human History*, from which the above quotation is taken, was a lifelong ordeal spent comprehending this paradox and an attempt by a professional historian, himself embedded in the Soviet academy, to construe a philosophy of history able to identify the limits of the revolutionary project and at the same time salvage its promises. His synthesis of negative dialectics and historical materialism transposed the negativity of defeat into a radical teleological perspective, which conceived of human history as a single, cognitive and political, revolution and at the same a "one-shot (*odnokratnyi*) act in the development of the universe" (NIOR RGB f.684, k.17, e.kh.6, l.37ob). In this teleological schema, humanity — unified as a species by unreason and disunity — is progressing through cycles of advancement and retreat, until it overcomes its antagonistic essence, a moment, however, tantamount to the very end of humanity and human history, and a leap towards some higher, cosmic order.

Amending and rewriting his project multiple times in the period between the mid-1930s and the early 1970s, Porshnev in a sense tried to edit the script of the derailed revolution. The archival trail, which accumulated in the process, will allow me to trace the outlines of Porshnev's unique, world-historical dialectics, through the lens of the historical trajectory of the revolution and gradual disassociation of Porshnev's own radical ideas from the revolutionary lifeworlds from which they originated. In doing this, I hope not only to highlight the relevance of his ideas in the present political and intellectual context, but also to illuminate our own embeddedness in history — whose own attribute of unity transitioned from "world" to "globe" — at the moment when the posthuman, and even the post-historical, seem to be closer than ever.

Critique of Human History in the Shadow of Revolutionary Defeat

The world-historical event of the Russian Revolution was as much about releasing the dark energies of the masses as it was about unleashing the utopian fantasies of the radical intelligentsia, who at the same time dreamed about transforming the masses and merging with them in the communist future (Halfin 2000). Institutionally and politically, the amalgamation of these two revolutionary tendencies in the crucible of the Great War and the Civil War produced not a fully fledged social or economic transformation, but an awkward hybrid “proletarian dictatorship” of professional revolutionaries and intellectuals ruling over the enormous sea of the peasantry. The decade of uncertainty, and the practical challenges of organizing political rule in a peasant country, produced a plethora of visions, debates, and policies on what the revolutionary future should be about. “Culture,” and the idea of its potential to forge revolutionary consciousness, was among the most prominent solutions offered by the Bolshevik leadership during the years of the NEP retreat, one which opened up an unusual two-way traffic between the artistic and scholarly communities and the world of politics. During the 1920s, many unorthodox scholars and artists shared the Bolshevik dissatisfaction with the old educational institutions, academic elites, and bourgeois forms of knowledge, and the (often violent) policies to change these structures created new institutional spaces where progressive ideas and revolutionary politics were merged into a single practice. Porshnev’s intellectual upbringing and the genealogy of his ideas is inconceivable outside of the experimental landscape created as the result of this fusion.

In the early 1920s, Porshnev participated in Mikhail Romm’s leftist theater, attended semi-official philosophical seminars, and peregrinated among the constantly restructured Moscow academic institutions. In 1924, after finishing his studies at the pedagogical division of Department of Social Sciences of Moscow State University, Porshnev found himself at a major laboratory of the cultural revolution, the Communist Academy. During the 1920s, the academy experimented with the principles and practices of the new, proletarian science, which involved questioning the old pedagogical methods (favoring collective over individual approaches), traditional academic divisions (sciences vs. humanities), and, especially, the “bourgeois” distinction between scientific objectivity and political engagement. Initially an employee of the academy’s Institute of Soviet Construction, Porshnev penned propaganda brochures on “culturedness” (*kulturnost’*) and the new consciousness of the masses (Porshnev 1926). The work on this “third” cultural front of the revolution continuously revealed to the Bolshevik intellectuals the inadequacy

of a simple application of *istmat* (historical materialism) principles for grasping the secrets of indoctrination, political mobilization, power, and consciousness, and strengthened their investment in the superstructural fields of language, symbols, psychology, and everyday life. The interest in these issues, and the desire to pursue them in a more historical and theoretical manner, brought Porshnev to another experimental institution of the 1920s — the Institute of History of the Russian Association of Scientific-Research Institutions for the Social Sciences (RANION), a unique institutional form of intellectual life, where bearers of the pre-revolutionary standards of knowledge and adherents of the radical intellectual transformations were openly engaged in mutual dialogue and competition. What was at stake during these RANION debates was the very understanding of history: Should history be a value-free collection of facts and an empirical construction of research problems, as professors with pre-revolutionary pedigree suggested, or a politically engaged and class-based materialist interpretation, as their opponents submitted? Ironically, the key Bolshevik historians in the institution, who would become Porshnev's mentors, were intellectual historians preoccupied primarily with ideas. One of them, Viacheslav Volgin, a specialist in the history of socialist ideas and the French Enlightenment and a top functionary at the Soviet Commissariat of Enlightenment, saw the Soviet efforts at rethinking and rewriting world history as a continuation of the universalistic ambitions of the Enlightenment, which he planned to realize through the creation of the new Soviet Encyclopedia (Kassof 2005). Methodologically, this idea was quite vague and mostly based on the rhetorical rejection of the particularism of Western-centered Hegelian narratives of world history, while retaining a great deal of Hegelianism in the importance ascribed to the development of ideas, science, and technology. The most innovative Soviet attempts at rethinking history pointed in a similar direction, and were attempts to conceive the totality of history through the materialistic interpretation of the relationship between consciousness, practice, and social and political reality.⁵

Absorbing these influences during his years at RANION, Porshnev engaged in his own experiments with writing the history of ideas as world history. In this, he was also greatly influenced by his understanding of Mikhail Bakunin's approach, in which he saw the intertwining of the history of the political and the cognitive with the history of spontaneous growth of the forces of the people, the masses (Kondratieva 2012). Porshnev explored this relationship in a variety of historical contexts, from Rousseau's writings to the history of Russian anarchism, slavophil-

⁵ One can think here about Vygotskian psychology, or the even more radical attempts by Nikolai Marr to create a non-linear (non-bourgeois and non-Western) explanation of the development of the cognitive forms of human mind and language.

ism, and populism, all of which he saw as part of the internally coherent whole of the history of forms of human thought, even while brazenly dismissing them as “mistaken,” “bourgeois,” “reactionary” (ARAN. f.359. op.3. d.62. l.215, 227–28). The final paper he wrote at RANION, “On the Social Foundations of Shamanism Among the Yakuts” (1929), captures the variety of Porshnev’s experiments with such Hegelian understanding of the history of ideas, where he anticipates the key philosophical themes, as well as revealing the ambitious nature of his incipient intellectual program. The ethnographic material in the paper appears to have been selected almost at random, and the question of the origin of the enigmatic “social-anarchic figure of the black shaman” was simply an excuse to pose the problem of “the irrational and the erratic in the history of human culture and human thought in general” (ARAN f.359. op.3. d.62. l.234). Porshnev started with the assertion that crude materialistic explanations of shamanism could not explicate its origins, since these explanations were based on an overly simplified understanding of shamanism’s irrationality. Shamanism was understood exclusively as the result of the underdevelopment of primitive consciousness, its very existence encapsulating the backwardness of its material circumstances (ARAN f.359. op.3. d.62. l.237). Openly revising the Marxist understanding of superstructure as a mirror of the material world, Porshnev proposed to study the history of the materiality of irrationalism (its “social-neurological, biological, and physiological nature”) and of the ideology stemming from it (ARAN f.359. op.3. d.62. l.254). However, he did not stop there, but further suggested that the history of irrationality was the very means by which to understand the specific form and course taken by human history. Because irrationality ran counter to the rationality of biological forms of life, it could be understood as the beginning of the social and the human *par excellence*. Of course, Porshnev did not attempt to resolve the problem of how the leap from the biological existence of man to the sociality of mankind managed to occur. But he maintained that in the drama of the shamanic séance (“specific form of hypnosis and suggestion”) (ARAN f.359. op.3. d.62. l.240), in its sounds, words, and gestures, it was possible to trace the gestation of forms of human consciousness, ideology, religion, and power. In this scenario, Porshnev considered language as the foundational social-physiological mechanism, on which the phenomenon of power, and the very possibility of human mind, rested. He posited that in order to explain the historical lineage of the human mind it is necessary to stop

wandering in the labyrinth of assumptions and arbitrary designs, and begin to examine primitive speech not as man’s one-sided reaction to the events of the external world<...> but above all as a human social function<...> the centerpiece that lies in the establishment of defined

and direct relationships of dependence between people and, likewise, in their social conflicts with one another” (ARAN f.359. op.3. d.62. l.244).

The paper ended with the ambitious statement that “history, if it is not understood simply as change over time, is anything but a simple fact. It still is waiting to be theoretically proven and explored” (ARAN f.359. op.3. d.62. l.266). By the early 1930s, however, this kind of agenda was clearly out of tune with the shape the revolutionary project had taken under Stalin, and Porshnev’s search for the theoretical proof of history continued not in the open experimental spaces of the 1920s, but in the secrecy of his improvised office in one of Moscow’s communal apartments. Stalin’s regime rendered history useful only as a way of justifying the existence of the highly oppressive political system built on the dialectical amalgamation of pre-revolutionary traditions and revolutionary ideas and practices. At the same time, the counterrevolutionary retreat did not simply negate the institutional and intellectual experiments of the 1920s; instead, it first enmeshed them with conservative epistemological and administrative structures of pre-revolutionary academia, and then subjected the resulting symbiotic structure to strict ideological control (David-Fox 2015: 133–59). In place of pursuing his interdisciplinary and philosophical program, the new circumstances forced Porshnev to refashion himself into a professional historian. The choice of his subject — popular movements in early modern France — clearly pointed to his long-standing anarchist and populist proclivities, and at the same time powerfully resonated with the populist turn taken by the Stalinist state in the second half of the 1930s. With his projects remunerated by the state, Porshnev quickly rose through the ranks of the Soviet academic world, becoming a professor at Moscow State University and an associate at the Institute of History responsible for writing world history for Stalin.

The first chapters of his closeted manuscript, *Critique of Human History* (henceforth CHH), were drafted in 1938, right at the moment when the major text proving the historical inevitability of Stalin’s utopia was released. Indeed, Stalin’s *Short Course* drew a teleological bottom line under two decades of revolutionary unrest. However, it is not easy to make out any clear polemic against the *Short Course* or any open criticisms of Stalinism in the text of CHH.⁴ Moreover, Porshnev did not see Stalinism as a distortion of some pristine revolutionary ideal, but as an inevitable retreat in the sequence of revolutionary cycles, which constituted the history of humanity as the history of “one revolution.” “Revolutions” known to historians, including the Russian revolution, were “only temporary vic-

⁴ Only Porshnev’s 1952 diary reflects his explicit critique of Stalin’s ideas about the economic foundations of communism. See NIOR RGB f.684, k.17, e.kh.2, ll.3–4, 22.

tories, after which a period of lesser resistance ensues, and then — a new ascent from a higher foundation becomes possible” (NIOR RGB f.684, k.27, e.kh.15, l.24ob). Each “revolution known to historians” constituted a link in the chain of cognitive and political development of humanity. And so, if Hegel designed his system in response to the impulses of the French revolution, Marx surpassed Hegel’s legacy by responding to the revolutionary enthusiasm of 1848. For Porshnev, who implicitly saw his own project as a link in this chain, the results of the Russian Revolution revealed that the *political* project of the emancipation of mankind was marked by some inherent *intellectual* contradictions. *CCH* was intended as a response to this intellectual challenge, the resolution of which was necessary to make the completion of the revolution possible.

To attend to the intellectual failure of the revolution meant first of all to explore the historical limits of Marxism as the doctrine for the transformation of mankind. Porshnev claimed that Marxism’s greatest problem was its inability to conceive the totality of history and the unity of mankind in light of its obvious separation into groups, classes, and nations. From here stemmed the mistaken ascription of universal significance to the particularistic “proletariat,” demarcated as the subject of history, and the post-revolutionary consolidation of another limited “we,” “the Soviet people” (NIOR RGB f.684, k.17, e.kh.2, ll.15–24). It is a truism to accuse the Stalinist version of Marxism, and Marx himself, of propagating a teleological perspective of history. Even more paradoxical, then, seems Porshnev’s further indictment that the Marxist failure to imagine the totality of history and the unity of humanity stemmed from its lack of clearly defined teleological concepts of the beginning and end of history. Thus the first, logical part of *CHH* had to redress this conceptual deficiency and establish the teleological limits of human history through the elaboration of these key concepts.

There was only a negative path for constructing them, as it was clear that “in a meaningful sense, the concept of the end of history is empty.” Regardless of that, Porshnev submitted, “on the other side of the limit should lie the ‘social,’ ‘cultural,’ and ‘spiritual’ side of man — in contrast to the ‘natural’ or ‘material’” (NIOR RGB f.684, k.17, e.kh.6, ll.15–16). Having thus established the concept of the end of history, it was possible to introduce its beginning:

“It is true that we can say little about this subject; we can only hypothesize that people, as biological species, existed before the beginning of history and, likewise, that their ‘productive forces,’ in other words, the character of their relation to the natural environment, are different from those at the end of history, or after its end.”

The idea of the two boundaries between which human history transpires meant that

“the entire content of human history can be presented as an uninterrupted and unified [*sploshnoi*] process, consisting of a movement from the beginning to the end, and therefore, as a single and completed [*tsel'nyi i zakonchennyi*] process, indivisible through time. But given that the contents of the beginning and the contents of the end are not identical, this process must involve some sort of metamorphosis” (NIOR RGB f.684, k.17, e.kh.6, ll.15–16).

In order to establish the content of the metamorphosis, Porshnev returned to the distinction between reason and nature, first introduced in the historiography of the Enlightenment and later popularized by Hegel. Until the mid-eighteenth century, natural and human history were considered to be qualitatively alike, reflecting a protracted influence of Christian universal histories (Feldner 2003: 15–17). By contrast, secularized Enlightenment narratives presented human history as something qualitatively different from nature, suggesting that human reason was the defining feature of its specificity. Not satisfied with the static nature of the Enlightenment conceptualization, which implied that human nature and mind remained the same in the course of history, Porshnev opted for infusing it with dialectical negativity. Thus he placed at the origins of humanity not human reason but rather the pathological — from the perspective of nature — ability of human consciousness to veer toward absurdity, and suggested that humanity can be more accurately defined not by the supposed universality of its common nature, but by undeniable facts of its divisiveness. Once the metamorphosis is completed, what stops to exist “is not the biological species *homo*, but the substance, which makes humanity united<...> the infinitely diverse types of connection between people in the form of the rupture of connection between them” (NIOR RGB f.684, k.17, e.kh.1, ll.43–45). Using these negative definitions, Porshnev eventually tried to rewrite the Enlightenment narrative of progress along more dialectical lines, placing the disappearance of human consciousness (defined negatively as unreason) and humanity (defined negatively as social disunity) at the “end of history.”

The systematic use of negative dialectics betrayed the powerful impact of Hegel on Porshnev. However, in a major deviation from the German philosopher, Porshnev had never seen the exhaustion of consciousness teleology as a simple theodicy of spirit but as a material process, accomplished within history through the actions of its disjointed subject — humanity. In developing this materialistic teleology of (un)reason, Porshnev drew on one of the most radical conceptions originating from the crucible of the Russian revolution — Emmanuil Enchmen's “theory of new

biology” (NIOR RGB f.684, k.27, e.kh.17, l.46ob; f.684, k.17, e.kh.1.125–126, 226).

In the early 1920s, Enchmen theorized human reason as an exploitative idea invented and applied by oppressive classes in order to prevent the emancipation of the masses. The victory of the revolution, according to Enchmen, would lead to the disappearance of reason, philosophy, arts, and science, returning humanity to the state of connectivity supported by natural reflexes (Joravsky 1961: 93–97). In the early 1920s, Enchmen’s ideas struck the ideological core of the revolutionary project, a vexed issue of the relationship between mind and masses, between the elitist intellectualism of the revolution and the popular elementalism of the revolutionary transformation. Enchmen’s propositions gained significant support from the politically active and quite numerous radical students of Communist educational institutions, while being lambasted by the Bolshevik leadership as a sign of ideological degeneracy. Porshnev attentively followed the political campaign against Enchmen during his student years. And while being aware of the lack of philosophical rigor in Enchmen’s theories, he was still eager to utilize its revolutionary potential and, in particular, to develop further his most provocative insight on the exploitative nature of the idea of the human mind. However, for Porshnev to understand the natural-scientific mechanisms regulating the processes of human consciousness meant first of all to explore their work at the origin of *social* exploitation. No doubt this kind of agenda, even less its technical realization, would be impossible without breakthroughs in the fields of linguistics, psychology, and physiology of the post-revolutionary decade. Relying particularly on the pathbreaking research of Lev Vygotsky, Alexei Ukhtomsky, and Nikolai Marr, the mind in Porshnev’s rendition appeared to be neither a Kantian transcendental machine, nor simply a sum of material reflexes, but a dynamic social, physiological, psychological, and historical relationship inscribed into the inherently contradictory totality of human history. At this point, the critique of reason could be legitimately transformed into a critique of world history (NIOR RGB f.684, k.17, e.kh.4, l.1, e.kh.6. l.13).

In his notes to *CHH*, Porshnev noted that the concept of the end of history was as important to his project as the concept of the beginning was for Hegel (NIOR RGB f.684, k.17, e.kh.4, l.1, e.kh.6. l.69). Indeed, Porshnev thought the idea of the end of history to be crucial conceptual development that made possible to logically conceive world history as totality (NIOR RGB f.684, k.17, e.kh.4, l.1, e.kh.6. l.45). In the second part of *CHH*, Porshnev had to meet Hegelian metaphysics in its own territory and to grapple natural-scientifically and philosophically with the problem of the origin of humanity, indispensable for a meaningful teleological conception of world history. Here, Porshnev once again returned to the distinction between human and natural history, and claimed that while

methodologically helpful, it had usually been taken for granted. Drawing a too-sharp line between the animalistic and the human, modern historiography and philosophy (including Marxism) was reproducing the bourgeois anthropocentrism of the Enlightenment, which opposed a ready-made human individual to the motionless and hostile nature. Rethinking the origins of the human from a non-anthropocentric (non-bourgeois) perspective implied shifting the position of nature from that of a passive background into an actor.

Porshnev argued that this process proceeded in two stages, or inversions. The first inversion, caused by a biological-physiological mutation in one species of apes and related to dietary changes, created a *biological* unity of human species. There was nothing predetermined in this change and Porshnev explored it as part of natural history, providing detailed visualizations of prehuman history: of prehistoric rivers and lakes, wandering herds of mammoths, dangerous predators, birds and fishes (NIOR RGB f.684, k.17, e.kh.3, l.6–10; NIOR RGB f.684, k.17, e.kh.5. l.7–60). As a result of this inversion, which was in conflict with the law of natural selection, the irrationalism of the intraspecies behavior was established, expressing itself principally in the phenomena of imitation and sound suggestion. Only the second, subsequent inversion, typified by a return to comparative biological stability through consolidation of the separated communities of individual species, led to the substantive beginning of human history, of human mind and sociality. According to Porshnev, human sociality has been realized through the division of humanity and its increasing multiplication into many opposing sets of “we” and “they” (tribes, ethnic groups, societies, classes, genders) buttressed by prohibitions. Humanity established itself only through the negation of the unity of the biological species of man (NIOR RGB f.684, k.17, e.kh.3, l.23).

This second inversion into sociality was embodied in a unique historical and material medium — language, which originated from the drama of suggestion and anti-suggestion, submission to, and freedom from, the coercive power of sound, unfolding at the borders between human groups (NIOR RGB f.684, k.17, e.kh. 3, l.1-23; e.kh. 4, l.6–10). The problematization of the medium of language served Porshnev as the crucial perspective for studying both the “invisible fabric of humanity’s unity in disunity” and the negative and exploitative origin of human mind, human labor, and human society (NIOR RGB f.684, k.17, e.kh. 1, l.44). For Porshnev, language reveals a frightening possibility for mass subordination the possibility to see people as inhuman. However, in the dialectically explosive negativity of the word (established at the level of physiology), Porshnev at the very same time observed the primary motor of the historical motion from the irrationality of non-knowledge to knowledge, from the state of oppression to the process of emancipation, and from the initial reality of separation, to the comprehension of humanity’s unity via rupture.

Two parts of *CHH* produced a combustive combination of empirical rigor and philosophical speculation to establish the limits of human history and allowed Porshnev to obtain a number of insights and themes that could develop further into a set of ambitious and interrelated research programs. On the most general level, Porshnev speculated that his teleological approach allowed human history to be seen as a “one-shot (*odnokratnyi*) act in the development of the universe” and could be used as a conceptual foundation for elaborating a new type of regularity, distinctive from the repeatable natural-scientific regularity operating in nature (NIOR RGB f.684, k.17, e.kh.1, l.53–54). This idea of non-repeatable regularity could be applied to synthesize the history of the human, life, nature, and cosmos in a similar teleological manner, as history with a definite beginning and end (NIOR RGB f.684, k.17, e.kh.1, l.53–54). Its reconstruction, in turn, called for a synthesis of the sciences and the humanities, which would treat the history of humanity as part of the history of universe. However, the presence of some regulated cosmic fatality in human existence (which Porshnev later related to the law of entropy) did not rule out active human input and the unpredictability of the way this fatality would be played out in actual history. Rewriting world history thus meant exploring the key fields of contention, and the sociological patterns, which humans followed in their journey from beginning to the end. The logical and historical reconstruction attempted in *CHH* pointed to a few principles that would guide Porshnev’s historiographical practice, the key among which was the idea of the division of humanity through ruptures/borders and the question of power. If previous sociology was “studying different connections between people,” Porshnev suggested to shift the focus to “the ruptures in connections between people” and “multiple borders dividing groups and constituting the fabric of humanity’s unity” (NIOR RGB f.684, k.17, e.kh.1, l.45). This implied the exploration of instabilities in the webs of human populations and societies, asymmetries within chains of human interaction, as well as cultural communications always fraught with tension, violence, and domination. Porshnev conceptualized power as the energy released from the ruptures between social and ethnic groups, as well as between individuals. He claimed that since

“the real content of social relations, of society, is the possibility of humans to affect, manipulate each other, there is only one sociological problem — the problem of power of one man over another” (NIOR RGB f.684, k.27, e.kh.17, l.63).

A major task for a historian would be to trace the changing forms of power along the path of human history. These could be placed between “complete automatism of submission (the speech mechanism), which did not need reinforcement” to the plethora of later iterations “related to vio-

lence, submission, and means of paralyzing one's will" (NIOR RGB f.684, k.27, e.kh.17, l.64). In human history, however, power becomes productive only through resistance to it, which manifests itself on different levels: from linguistic resistance of the individual mind to collective struggle of the masses. As he succinctly put it, "where there is nothing to be liberated from, there is no freedom" (NIOR RGB f.684, k.27, e.kh.15, l.26). Subjugation and liberation were defined as two dialectically related processes through which humanity gravitated towards the end of history and which had to be particularly scrutinized by historians.

Porshnev was well aware of the breadth of his agenda, assuming that it could only be pursued collectively, not individually. Its ambition would rather fit the experimental revolutionary landscape of the 1920s, with its infinite opportunities for institutional building and the intimate relations between revolutionary practice and intellectual reflection. By the late 1930s, the consolidation of the formidable post-revolutionary order made the realization of these radical dreams effectively impossible. Nevertheless, Porshnev's desire to bring closure to all of history and the hope to wed reflection and practice never dissipated, and the rest of his life was punctuated by the incessant effort to overcome the deep incongruity between his revolutionary desires and the limitations imposed by the conservative present. The versatility of Porshnev's official academic pursuits, which often confused and irritated his contemporaries, in fact reflected his persistent attempt to invisibly nest his project in the rigid institutional contexts and political realities. In fact, to follow this unfolding of the disassociation of radical ideas from their original revolutionary lifeworlds is one way to trace the downward trajectory of the revolution itself. In these circumstances, the activist resolution to bring humanity closer to the end was inevitably fraught with temptations, difficult choices, and failures. At the moment of the eschatological anticipation of the end it was much easier for Porshnev, psychologically, to disregard the repressive reality that surrounded him and look for intellectual short-cuts, rather than retreat into a dialectical reflexivity of despair. After all, Porshnev was a Hegelian, and his belief in the power of ideas resonated with some ideological pronouncements of the repressive state. The very existence of the ideocratic state, with the philosopher-king on top, seemed alluring.

In the second half of the 1940s Porshnev's academic career entered its prime. Published in 1948, his dissertation on popular revolts received the Stalin Prize and Porshnev's theoretical explorations of class struggle in history were gaining popularity as being potentially the new orthodoxy in the context of postwar ideological campaigns. Congruent with important parts of his invisible project, Porshnev nevertheless clearly saw the promotion of his ideas at this moment as a springboard for reaching institutional and intellectual power. Quite spectacularly he thought of reach-

ing out to Stalin, winning him over by the power of the argument, and thus putting the revolution back on track. The ultra-Hegelian drafts of *CHH*, written in the late 1940s, symptomatically celebrated the scientific mind as the ultimate engine of change and ascribed to Porshnev's project the leading role in the transcendence of history (NIOR RGB f.684, k.27, e.kh.15. l.6ob). On these pages, Porshnev had turned into a Nietzschean Zarathustra, the hero defying social norms in order to "change as much as possible" on the way to the end of history (NIOR RGB f.684, k.17, e.kh.2, l.9). In reality, these dreams followed much less sublime scenarios, simply turning Porshnev into yet another participant of the Stalinist "science wars," who fought for resources, wrote denunciations, and solicited support from the Party and Stalin himself. The collective of Soviet historians, for their part, responded in kind, and successfully neutralized the defiant liquidator of history, who was eventually obliged to repent for his "subjectivist exaggeration of the role of class struggle in history" (Ryzhkovskiy 2009, 2017).

By the late 1950s, Stalin had died, history had not come to an end, and Porshnev was still alive. His efforts at rewriting and amending the *CHH* project reflected his hope that the trajectory taken by the world would change, or at least that the disintegration of the revolutionary imagination he had experienced at home would slow down. The Cold War prospect of the total annihilation of humanity in a nuclear disaster appalled Porshnev, and threatened his own radical-teleological vision of the end of history. This gave him even more incentive to bring the project — and thus history itself — to completion, which was now demanded not just by "history, but by the cosmos" (NIOR RGB f.684, k.17, e.kh.2, l.3–4).

Ironically, he tried to accomplish this using the institutional and funding opportunities opened up by Cold War competition. His chase of the yeti, which he commenced in the late 1950s, was initially funded by the hawkish Soviet military. For Porshnev, as a terrible "other" placed at the center of the conundrum of humanity's internal antagonism, the yeti was a logical possibility that affirmed his argument about the two inversions, but was at the same time a biological creature, the showcasing of which would be tantamount to showcasing the truth and power of his philosophico-historical project. The failure to produce "evidence" and catch the creature eventually made it impossible for Porshnev to obtain membership in the Academy of Sciences (Porshnev 1968).

A simple enumeration of all Porshnev's pursuits and projects in this period — including an attempt to create an interdisciplinary board, uniting the efforts of the natural sciences and the humanities, to institutionalize the discipline of social psychology in the structures of the Soviet Academy, the yeti chase, and the continuation of his work on the origins of humanity — would create an overwhelming list, improbable to be covered by a single person. Porshnev's attempt at rewriting world history —

a crucial, and empirically the most challenging part of his project — reflected both his increased marginalization in the non-revolutionary environment, and the impossibility of singlehandedly realizing the agenda set up in *CHH*. His philosophical speculations and insights nonetheless produced some extraordinary historiographical results.⁵ However, Porshnev clearly did not have a penchant for relating his philosophical insights to the minute details of the historian's craft, including the exploration and interpretation of new sources. While trying to fill too many gaps on his own, he spread himself thinner and thinner in his historical explorations. The task of rewriting world history along the lines drawn in *CHH* was enormous and could be managed only collectively. But there were no Soviet collectives up to this task.

By the late 1960s, the edifice of the official *Soviet World History*, laid out in the late 1930s, was finally erected, in ten monumental volumes (Zhukov 1955–1965). Porshnev, who initially considered the project as a testing ground for his ideas, could only express deep frustration with the final result, in which he saw no conception of either world or history, but “a more or less sophisticated assemblage of separate bricks” (NIOR RGB f.684, k.17, e.kh.1, l.43). These bricks constituted the facade of the ossified official Marxism, behind which in the early 1970s one could find varieties of platitudinarian empirical positivism or mild forms of cultural relativism, none of which was dialectical or revolutionary. By the same token, none would find Porshnev's own philosophical insights about world history particularly useful. By the 1970s, both the yeti hunt and the amusing defense of orthodox Marxism seemed a savagery to Porshnev's Soviet ill-wishers, something approaching the realm of the psychic or supernatural, popular among readers of Soviet pop-science magazines. Throughout his life, Porshnev was running after the constantly vanishing revolutionary horizon. In his final years, however, he did not expect much to come. On the eve of 1972, Porshnev was rereading the heap of manuscripts in his archive and melancholically meditating on the fate of his as-yet incomplete project.⁶ Porshnev felt that he lacked the time and energy to finish

⁵ Particularly impressive were his attempt of writing a lateral world history of the seventeenth century, which build on his previous explorations of popular uprisings in early modern Europe (Porshnev 1970; 1995); a short but insightful essay on the entangled history of the barbaric and Roman world (Porshnev 1964: 507–18) as well as a manifesto arguing for the necessity of approaching world history as an interconnected whole (Porshnevv 1969).

⁶ The first part of the *CHH* trilogy, entitled “Paleontology” was completed only partially; the second, a book draft of *On the Origin of Human History* was written, while the third, which was to provide an overview of the trajectory of human history and its post-historical prognosis, existed only in extensive fragments and outlines. In the early 1970s, Porshnev tried to publish a self-censored version of *On the Origin of Human History*, the second part of his trilogy, with all references and logical connections to the

his lifetime's project, and sensed that his type of philosophizing was just too out of tune with the political and intellectual expectations of the age. This premature archivization of Porshnev's project reflected not just the bad fortune of his own ideas, but the process of archivization of the Revolution itself, of the revolutionary forms of imagining the future and the progressive forms of perceiving time. In his last diary entry, written ten months before his death, Porshnev willed all the fragments of his project to the future, expecting them to be rediscovered no earlier than half a century later (NIOR RGB f.684, k.27, e.kh.16, l.46.).

After the End of History. Porshnev's Present-Day Relevance

Porshnev's prognosis seems to have been right. However, when in 2011 I accidentally stumbled upon his archive in the Russian State Library, I was not the first to go through the dusty folders and files of his collection. In the 1990s and 2000s there was no lack of intellectual historians, historiographers, or Porshnev's academic sympathizers who resorted to the archive in order to explore the scholarly virtues of the yeti chase. But, perhaps because they had been as confounded as I initially was by the content of the archive, they chose to keep silent about his desire to achieve the end of history in the name of a revolutionary totality of History. Indeed, for many intellectuals in present-day Russia, attitudes towards the revolution and its legacy still define the limits of intellectual "sanity" much more forcefully than the definitions of the "paranormal," and chasing the yeti may seem for them more appropriate than pursuing the revolution. What made me peruse, over and over, the voluminous pages of poor handwriting were the uncanny parallels between the major themes pursued by Porshnev in his project and the most advanced academic, philosophical, and political discussions in the West today. In the past decade one can notice a triumphant return of world history in the guise of the "global turn" in academia, as well as an upsurge of interest in questions defined by the analytical frameworks such as the anthropocene, posthumanism, and non-anthropocentric approaches to history and politics. What, then, does the heap of archival materials constituting Porshnev's *CHH*, as well as the experience of revolutionary defeat that gave rise to it,

larger project of the *CHH* deleted. Still, even in this form, the manuscript did not receive bureaucratic approval by the academic establishment. An abridged version of the self-censored book was eventually published after Porshnev's death in 1974. Its full text became available only in the edition prepared by Oleg Vite in 2007 (Porshnev 2007).

mean historiographically, philosophically, and politically, against the backdrop of these recent developments, and what may the process of their reception involve? How do they — and do they — disturb the smooth flow of intellectual agendas and political debates?

Porshnev's teleological perspective on history is hardly in tune with prevailing professional standards; however, his insights paradoxically resonate powerfully with the conceptual bases of the cutting edge of professional global history and historical sociology. And while with the present level of professional sophistication, as well as the sheer amount of new knowledge, many of Porshnev's specific historical claims do not always hold, his historiographical interventions nonetheless show a deep and productive relation between his research questions and the philosophical discourse on history. Porshnev's world history is vividly material and planetary in scale, ambitiously interdisciplinary, anticipating as its limit the possibility of synthesis between natural and human history. In this regard, his response to the experience of revolutionary defeat significantly differed from his Western Marxist (Anderson 1976) and Soviet equivalents (Sziklai, 1986), both of which placed culture and consciousness at the center of their critical work. By contrast, Porshnev aspired to explore the relationship between the mind and the surrounding world through thorough historicization and ontologization of this relationship — an approach that absorbed the myriads of smaller intellectual explosions of the revolutionary era. In this regard, Porshnev's philosophically sophisticated materialism is not a unique phenomenon, but an index, pointing to yet another and so far poorly explored materialistic dimension of the intellectual revolution of 1917, which had been forgotten or was obliterated by the rise of cultural and linguistic paradigms, dominant in human and social sciences in the second half of the twentieth century.⁷

However, while introducing Porshnev's unorthodox ideas on world history, my point was not simply to provide them with an intellectual and contextual commentary, but to reflect on them in a Porshnevian fashion, taking them as part of some unfinished historical totality. In this sense — and this was quite clear to Porshnev — a deep relation exists between world history as a revolutionary process and world history as an intellectual practice that is inscribed in the material totality of history and its dialectical cycles of revolutionary victories and defeats. In the context of

⁷ Porshnev's more specific logical, cognitive, and archaeological explorations, which I could only allude to, cannot be disjointed from his philosophical framework and deserve to be explored on their own. A good example of this kind of engagement is Artemy Magun's recent publication, which specifically discusses Porshnev's theory of human origins and its significance for the present-day debates on the subject (Magun 2017). At the backdrop of the recent developments in cognitive archaeology, material engagement theory, etc., Porshnev's still unpublished manuscripts containing his ideas on the teleological ontology of mind may be of particular interest.

intellectual history, this dialectic can hardly be grasped without attending to the importance of the negativity of the marginal spaces from which emancipatory intellectual programs — those to which the world-historical approach is related — have been launched, as well as the role played by professionalism and institutionalization in their subsequent neutralization. Initiating this cycle in the genre of world history's trajectory, the Enlightenment universal histories and histories of mankind were not simply intellectual ventures, but political gestures in their own right, which targeted particularistic conceptual foundations of the traditional estate societies in the name of united humanity. At the same time, the writing of history implied the inscription of this practice into new and autonomous spaces, which, for historians, meant connecting to the expanding book markets, the multiplying bourgeois publics, breaking with official court support and private patronage networks, and bringing universal histories into bourgeois salons and coffeehouses (Woolf 2014: 285–90). In the wake of the French Revolution, and as a result of yet another epistemological (counter)revolution, the professionalization of history as an academic discipline was enacted through privileging the state and nation as the proper subject of history, while universal histories were rejected as unscientific (Harbsmeier 1989). Since then, “real” history had to be produced only in licensed spaces — state sponsored universities. Deprofessionalized and discredited, losing much of its cosmopolitan flavor, by the mid-nineteenth century world history was reduced to a philosophical shorthand, popularized by Hegel, for advancing the teleological path of a few civilized European nations towards uncontested global domination, with the multiple colonial, or marginal European others who did not fit into the framework simply placed outside of history, or in its “waiting room” (Chakrabarty 2000: 8–9). This vision of both world and history provided mental, epistemological, and institutional foundations for Western domination across the globe in the long nineteenth century, and it permeated universities, colonial offices as well as popular and lavishly illustrated books for the educated European middle class (Bergenthum 2004). Posing a challenge to this European model, the Russian Revolution marked another cycle of the reassembling of spaces, institutions and publics, aimed not only at deciphering the past but also at prefiguring the society of the future. As I show, in doing so the Russian Revolution relied not on bourgeois coffeehouses but the deeply entrenched culture of intelligentsia circles, which proved to be a testing ground for synthesizing artistic, intellectual experiments and dreams of historical transcendence. However, these novel intellectual breakthroughs were similarly followed by their ultimate neutralization, in which they were subordinated to the new structures of political and academic power, as well as the new epistemological hierarchies that rejected critical materialism in favor of unreflective cultural encyclopedism with its “academism, museomania, and the

general smell of mothballs” (Debray 2007: 15). As I argued, Porshnev tried to intervene in this process of the dissociation of revolutionary ideas from their innovative social and material contexts, but was eventually unable to challenge the ultra-positivistic and professional consensus of the intellectual establishment both during the Stalin era, when his academic position was prominent, and after, when he was seen as a remnant of the Stalinist past.

Porshnev’s work, indicatively, enables us to trace a similar trajectory of advancement and retreat in the West. In the aftermath of the Second World War, in the climate of high expectations for progressive, and even revolutionary, political and cultural changes, Porshnev’s interpretations of European modern history, with their focus on popular resistance against state oppression, attracted significant attention in European intellectual and historiographical circles. Among his sympathizers — which included the British Marxists who ran the pathbreaking journal *Past and Present*, as well as the moderate socialist and promoter of *histoire totale*, Fernand Braudel — were collectives of historians who were located on the margins of the academic system and who saw their own effort to rewrite history along more materialistic and universalistic lines as a political gesture against the political and intellectual elites discredited in the course of the war.⁸ By the late 1970s, however, Porshnev slipped under the historiographical radar in the West as thoroughly as he did in the Soviet Union, as his ideas did not survive another cycle of revolutionary retreat in the wake of 1968. The fragmentation of the field of progressive politics in the aftermath of 1968 meant in a sense the dialectical neutralization of the postwar revolutionary impulse within the restructured capitalist system. In turn, the previously marginal and politically committed research programs became neutralized, paradoxically, through their institutionalization within the fragmented and increasingly accommodating university space — itself a sign of the capitalist restructuring of the university. Since the early 1980s, dreams of *intellectual revolution*, which inspired radical programs in the past, have been supplanted by more pragmatic and businesslike participation in *intellectual turns*, without the obligation to envision the ultimate destination of the turning. With space for institutional growth in the conditions of the competitive knowledge market, and filtered through the grid of professionalization, they almost inevitably lost their political negativity, as well as their connection to marginal spaces

⁸ Porshnev was a member of the transnational network of *Past and Present*, contributing to the journal occasionally (Hill, Hilton, and Hobsbawm, 1983). He was a frequent guest at Braudel’s seminars and an admirer of his scholarship, which he considered to be at least partially congruent with his own idea of world history. The French translation of Porshnev’s Stalin Prize awarded book on popular uprisings in the seventeenth-century France, which catapulted Porshnev in to the center of French historiographical debates, was made through Braudel’s publishing network (Porshnev 1963).

and publics, transforming into yet another item of the expanding academic market.⁹

Unsurprisingly, the recent academic return of the global (the genealogy of which is beyond the scope of this article), following a similar logic of professionalization, institutionalization, and commodification, does not have any trouble accommodating the politically radical versions of global history — including those of a Marxist or neo-Marxist bent, be it “world-system analysis,” postcolonial or decolonial theory — which can, however, hardly be accessed outside of the increasingly corporatized university environment (Keucheyan 2013: 22–23).¹⁰ My point, however, is not to engage in a partisan critique of the embeddedness of (pure) critical thought in the (corrupt) structure of academia, but to invoke the historicity of the present moment, as another moment of what I see as Porshnev’s dialectics of defeat, which, by the same token, requires a renewed engagement with a set of the same, or similar questions — in this case concerning the production of historical knowledge. A combined effect of reading Porshnev’s dialectics of history and the dialectics of his own revolutionary experience alerts us against an unreflexive and dehistoricized appropriation of the ideas of the Russian Revolution, in the moment of its centennial reactualizations, and at the same time constitutes a plea for the historicization of our own present-day intellectual and political condition, in which Porshnev’s method of dialectical thinking around defeat could provide a necessary prompt for future emancipatory visions. It is difficult and perhaps too early to say whether the revival of socialist agendas and progressive movements in some parts of the world since the late 1990s is simply a mirror effect of capitalist globalization or the beginning of a new revolutionary cycle. But for a critical Left to find an answer to this question would require a vision of its place within the historical cycles of revolutionary advances and retreats, as well as a new kind of synthesis of intellectual reflection and revolutionary practice, since at the present intellectual and political juncture, we are faced not simply with the challenge of producing new radical knowledge (the university is a factory successfully fulfilling this task), but with that of anchoring it within the existing and newly imagined spaces, and among a variety of publics.¹¹

⁹ On a macro-level the 1917–1928 revolutionary phase of the Russian Revolution finds its equivalent in the ascendance of the progressive politics and civil movements from the crucible of the 1945 revolutionary experiences in the West. Similarly to the establishment of Stalinism through the “revolutionary” Great Break of 1929–1931, 1968 in the West can be seen as an index of a similar revolutionary acceleration, marking the establishment of the formidable global capitalist system.

¹⁰ The privilege of free access to academic journals and publications is just one most immediate example of the privatization and corporatization of knowledge.

¹¹ A thoughtful discussion of the multiple ways in which the Occupy Movement affected and engaged the academy, as well as the challenges universities and intellectu-

Porshnev loved to use the image of the mountain range to describe the process of human self-knowledge. The path from one peak to the other can only lead through a descent into a valley, after which another ascent begins. At the present moment, it seems to me that the critical approach implies that it is not just the celebration of the peaks, but an awareness of the convoluted and complex path running throughout the range that could make another ascendance possible once again.

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