

Dr. Julia Zlatkova

Institute of Balkan Studies & Center of Thracology, Sofia

Philosophical Considerations of War: Berdyaev's Views on the First World War

Nicolay Berdyaev was one of the most prominent and gifted representatives of the Russian religious renaissance of the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. He was not just a thinker, philosopher, and theologian, but a real genius, whose prophetic view on history and human existence enabled him to foresee phenomena and processes, which ultimately appeared decades later and even, are materializing in our own days. Alexander Menn defined Berdyaev as “a philosopher of the 21st century”. He was more popular abroad than in his native Russia during his lifetime. This, to a great extent was due to the First World War and the dramatic transformations and changes it brought to political and social history and to the personal life of everyone who was involved and affected by it. Berdyaev was forced to leave Soviet Russia in 1922 and spent the rest of his life in exile – first in Berlin, and than in Paris, where he moved in 1924 and lived until his death in 1948. The First World War and the Bolshevik's revolution, which was provoked by the wars' degeneration, influenced significantly not just Berdyaev's personal life and destiny, but also his philosophy of history, which was based on Christian believes and values.

This paper examines the First World War from the point of view of Berdyaev's philosophy of history. It focuses on the problems of the East-West relations, ideology of the warring parties, nature of war, psychology of war, role of technology in the war, Christian attitudes towards war, and the aftermaths of the First World War.

In Berdyaev's opinion the First World War was a watershed and turning point in European history, which marked the end of Modern Age and the beginning of the New Middle Ages. The rational day of Modern History turned to irrational night of the New Middle Ages, and the Great War was an accelerator of this process. The transition from Modern Age to a New Historical Age, which Berdyaev metaphorically defined as the New Middle Ages was not peaceful but catastrophic. It resembled the transition from Antiquity to Middle Ages and was accompanied by a process of barbarization and destruction, which were a natural consequence of war, revolution, and political chaos. "We are living in an age similar to the fall of the Ancient world"¹, Berdyaev wrote in 1924, in his popular essay *New Middle Ages*.

The conceptual foundations of the 19th century (individualism, nationalism, liberalism, democracy, humanism, formal justice, parliamentary, constitutionalism, faith in progress, etc.), were destroyed in the Great War. The states build on these foundations, no matter monarchies or democracies, were destroyed too. The state itself was in crisis and suffered collapse, there were not strong and long-lived states anymore, Berdyaev wrote.²

The First World War had a great significance for the East-West relations. It led up to unique meeting and interaction between eastern and western world,

¹ Бердяев, Николай. Новое Средневековье. Москва, 1991, 8.

² Бердяев, Новое Средневековье, 16.

which were isolated and alienated before the war. The East came into contact with the West through the dissension and destruction of war. The Balkans had a central place and role in the East-West relations and in the World War. The war began on the Balkans and was an extension of the unsolved Eastern Question. „Not a single question of the World War can be positively solved and first of all – the Eastern Question can not be solved... And new horrific wars will break out in the future in case the Eastern Question remained unsolved”³, Berdyaev wrote.

The real cause of the war, however, was not the Eastern Question and the Balkan quarrels, but the godless world of industrial capitalism and imperialism, which militaristically exterminated itself in the war. The world of socialism, which was born by the war, was not an alternative, but an extension of the same system of industrial capitalism and a final revelation and spreading of its basic principles – materialism, godlessness, and superficial enlightenment.

Berdyaev’s view on the ideology of the warring parties explains the hopelessness and the deadlock of the war. In his opinion the Allies did not have a positive notion of the war. Their ideology was humanitarian and pacifistic, while Germany was extremely organized and disciplined, but impotent. German imperialism was purely militaristic, in contrast to the peaceful economic imperialism of the British Empire. British imperialism was successful, while German imperialism was a failure, as far as Germany did not have imperialistic vocation. Her imperialism was actually an extreme form of nationalism. The militaristic and coercive character of German imperialism became fatal to Germany itself and to the whole Europe.⁴ German victories did not increase the

³ Бердяев, Николай. Судьба России. Опыты по психологии войны и национальности. Москва: Г. А. Леман и С. И. Сахаров, 1918. - http://www.krotov.info/library/02_b/berdyaev/1918_15_0.html

⁴ Конец Европы IV. – В: Бердяев, Судьба России.

German threat to the world. Germany was exhausted and frightened of its own victories, but the Allies were exhausted too. The final result was that both of the warring parties (the whole Europe, in fact) lost the war and the one, who took advantage of it, was not a European power, but the Far East and the far West – America and Japan and China. Especially dangerous for the European culture and Christianity itself was the threat from the Mongol East, which would become extremely powerful after the European catastrophe.

Berdyaev examined the war not just as a historical but also as a spiritual phenomenon. In his view, the nature of every war was symbolic, reflective, and symptomatic. Material war was just a physical manifestation of spiritual war. War, like everything material was only a symbol and sign of spiritual activity. Everything external was but a manifestation of the internal. Physical violence and killing was only a reflection of hatred and spiritual illnesses and animosities. War did not create the evil, it just reveal it. Only the dualistic point of view could separate from and oppose matter to spirit. The wars were waged not only on physical aspect and not only on the limited area on the Earth. The wars were waged on every aspect of life. They happened in the heavens and within the depths of spirit and reflected on the surface of the material world.⁵

Berdyaev paid special attention to the role of technology in the First World War. Technology had dramatically changed the nature of warfare by 1914 and contributed to its devastating effect. The First World War was a war of industry and machinery, it was a futuristic war. The war was to a great extent a result of the increasing role of machinery in human life and a consequence of the industrial revolution. Russia's technological backwardness and its inability to adequately respond to the futuristic war led by Germany, was one of the reasons

⁵ Бердяев, Николай. *Философия на неравенството*. София: Прозорец, 1994, 172-183.

for Russia's weakness in the Great War. But like everything material technology itself was not responsible for the bloodshed, destruction, and the final results of the war. The spirit of futurism, which predominated before the war was not just an artistic movement, but a reflection of fascination with speed, machinery, cruelty, violence, and industry. The article 9 of the Futurist Manifesto, written by the Italian poet Marinetti in 1909 stated: "We will glorify war—the world's only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman". The crisis of arts, which found its best expression in cubism and futurism, was a reflection of crisis of humanity itself, and a reflection of mechanization of life. Futurism spread from art into real life, into a Great War.⁶

The wars, however, can not be just negatively judged. The catastrophe of war leads to human unity and globalization. Wars were the most powerful instrument of peoples' unification and manifestation of national character. This was not valid of course for civil wars, which led not to unification, but to atomization, social disintegration and degradation, and at the end – to ferocity and savagery. A dualistic process was going on in the course of Modern History – a process of individualization through national wars for liberation and independence; and a process of unification through imperialistic wars for world domination. These two processes coexisted and did not exclude each other. It might be said, that mankind was moving towards unity through a national individualization. And it can likewise be said, that mankind was moving towards unity through a worldwide discord of war. National and imperialistic wars did not disturb the universal hierarchy, only the civil wars and social fights did it.

⁶ Бердяев, Николай. Кризис искусства. (Репринтное издание). Москва: СП Интерпринт, 1990, 48.

Christian attitudes to the war were highly complicated and ambiguous. Religious mind accepted the war and understood its redeeming meaning. But this acceptance was a tragic and antinomic, not positive and optimistic. On the other hand it rejected the war as horrific evil, which leads to dehumanization, destruction and death. But the religious point of view was not a pacifist. Militarism and pacifism were equally unacceptable for the religious mind. The Great War revealed the impotence and the superficial character of all kinds of social utopias – humanism, pacifism, international socialism, anarchism etc. Pacifism was only a rationalistic negation of irrational nature of war and could not prevent it nor comprehend it. There were different types of wars – imperialistic, colonial, wars for national liberation and independence, and the worst of all – civil wars. All the wars, despite of their character and goals, were expression of the dynamics of history and the free competition and interaction between people, peoples and states. While pacifism was an expression of static view on history. It negated the dynamism of history and aimed to put an end to history. The Great War revealed the untenability and naivety of the rationalistic utopias of the eternal peace, freedom, brotherhood, and equality, which can not be fulfilled in our fallen world, full of sorrow and pain.

At its end, the Great War degenerated and lost its idea and its sense. By 1917 the growing sense of despair and lack of purpose resulted in widespread discontent and total demoralization, both in the armies and on the home front. The profound degeneration and demoralization of war caused the Bolshevik's revolution in Russia and violent riots throughout Europe. The world's first systematic genocide was committed during the First World War. In this situation the peace was the only salvation from the horrors, desperation, and tiredness of war, in spite that it was a bad and unjust peace. The war did not solve any problem and ended with a

bad peace in Berdyaev's opinion. Both communism and fascism emerged as a result of the First World War. They extended the militaristic lifestyle and fascination with violence and cruelty into the civil life. The underground war continued throughout the whole interwar period and the Second World War was a natural and unavoidable continuation of First World War. But under the surface of destruction, hostility, and dissent a process of unification was going on. Not just European, but universal unification. The First World War brought not just political, economic, and social crisis, but also a spiritual one. The effect of the spiritual crisis was unpredictable according to Berdyaev, and could not be judged from the utilitarian point of view and welfare.

The most important consequence of the First World War was the decline of Europe and the rise of the Far East (Japan and China) and the United States which were the real winners of the Great War. Europe was displaced from its position of worlds' cultural, economic, and political leader by America and China, which became the new world leaders. "Americanism and Chinism will rise after the fall and decline of Europe and Russia. This new world powers could find common points between each other and new kingdom of Chinese-American equality will emerge".⁷ Berdyaev predicted this in 1918, at the end of First World War.

The world history was to a great extent a history of wars. The short periods of peace – the last quarter of the 19th century, for example, created the false notion that peace, not war was normal and natural condition for human kind. The First World War destroyed this false notion and revealed the vitality of the militaristic instincts. The First World War was an apocalyptic war. It was an eschatological moment in history, and an inner apocalypse of history. The war did

⁷ Бердяев, Судьба России.

not put an end to history, but it marked the end of a whole historical age and four Empires. The meaning of the First World War and the meaning of history itself is super-historical. It lies beyond the limits of historical time and process, in the depths of eternity.