

# NIKOLAI BERDIAEV AND THE “BOUNDLESS SPACES” OF RUSSIA

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## Abstract

*The article analyses the ways in which the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev understood Russian space and geography, beginning with the texts that he wrote during the First World War and ending with his book *The Russian Idea* (1946). It was characteristic of Berdiaev to extensively recycle passages from his own texts, not least those that put forth the claim that there was a correspondence between Russia’s vast and wide-open spaces and the “Russian soul.” However, the article argues that Berdiaev’s seemingly similar phrases had different meanings in different contexts. In the 1910s, his perspective was predominantly critical, if speculative, positing that the acquisition of large territories had prevented the Russian “self-organization” in thought and culture. After the 1917 revolutions and his own emigration in 1922, by contrast, Berdiaev gradually became more essentialist in his approach to Russian space, seeing the vast territories as perfectly matching the strivings and quests of the Russian people. The article contextualises Berdiaev’s understanding of space both in relation to nineteenth-century traditions of interpreting Russian geography and to the political upheavals that took place during his lifetime.*

## Keywords

*Russian Philosophy; History of Ideas; Space; Gender; Identity Formation; Nikolai Berdiaev*

The claim that some kind of correspondence exists between a specific Russian mentality (or the “Russian soul”) and the vast and wide-open Russian landscape, has been described as “one of the most popular Russian autostereotypes” (Møller 1999, 11). One of the most prominent proponents of this stereotype in the first half of the Twentieth Century was the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev (1874–1948). Berdiaev would return to this connection time and time again in his writings on Russia and Russian thought.

Berdiaev published his first book in 1901. In time Russia itself would become a central topic in his philosophical writings. Berdiaev’s interest in Russia peaked for the first time during the First World War. Simultaneously with the writing of what is considered his major philosophical work, *The Meaning of Creativity* (1916), Berdiaev began to produce a vast output of smaller pieces on Russia. It was the war itself that prompted Berdiaev to reflect upon Russia, but his pieces were concerned not so much with the ongoing war as with Russia’s history, culture and people, which he often approached from a religious, messianic-prophetic perspective. Before the war he had disseminated his views on Russia and its meaning from time to time, for instance in *The Philosophy of Freedom* (1911) or in his 1912 monograph on the Slavophile Aleksei Khomiakov, in which he suggested that a messianic self-awareness was something distinctively Russian. However, it was during the war that “this messianism reached its most optimistic and triumphalist peak” (Siljak 2016, 749).



In 1915, Berdiaev published the essay “The Soul of Russia” as a separate brochure. Later, this piece emerged with several others in the book *The Fate of Russia* (1918). As a whole, this book is compiled of politically engaged, optimistic but at times also quite anxious reflections on the author’s homeland as a realm threatened by dissolution. The 1918 Introduction announces that “Great Russia is no more, and the global tasks that I have tried in my own way to make sense of are no longer raised before her” (Berdiaev 2007, 17). Whilst external threats such as the German invasion had worried Berdiaev throughout his wartime writings, he often allocated the problems with which Russia had to struggle to Russia itself. One of these problems, to which Berdiaev now drew his readers’ attention, was precisely that of space. Russia’s vast territories had an important impact not only on practical imperial rule, but ultimately, so Berdiaev proclaimed, on the Russian way of thinking.

From 1915 onwards, the relation of the Russian landscape to the “Russian soul” became one of Berdiaev’s favourite topics. We encounter it again in his book *Dostoevsky’s Worldview*, which he wrote in 1920–21. At first glance, here and later, it may seem as if Berdiaev was merely recycling his previous texts in his own characteristic way, restating the same idea over and over again. On closer scrutiny, however, as this article will argue, the meaning of Berdiaev’s statements shifts with context, despite their seemingly similar message. “Context” as I use it here may refer to a broader historical or social context (such as the war situation); to the “networks of beliefs” of which his texts are part and with which they engage; and to the overall intentions of Berdiaev’s own books, which were dependent on the situation in which they were written to a much higher extent than scholarship on Berdiaev has traditionally acknowledged (Mjør 2011, 206–207). Thus, the crucial question becomes what the texts were *intended as* (Skinner 2002, 49, 99–100), not least in relation to specific traditions of conceptualising Russian space.

This article seeks to demonstrate that the network of beliefs encountered in Berdiaev’s writings on Russia contain conflicting ideas: he sometimes criticised, sometimes endorsed what he saw as a specific Russian mentality. Occasionally he would even seek to combine these two perspectives, but the main tendency was initially to regard Russia’s vast spaces as a fundamental problem, later to emphasise their positive meaning. I will seek to demonstrate this by comparing the *Fate of Russia* to *Dostoevsky’s Worldview*, whilst simultaneously drawing on later works such as *The Origin of Russian Communism* and *The Russian Idea*.

### **Russian Space and Russian Soul**

The essay in *Fate of Russia* which deals explicitly with space is “The Power of Spaces over the Russian Soul.” It starts off in a typical Berdiaevian manner by stating that much is “enigmatic in Russian history.” The main “enigmatic” factor that is highlighted is geography, and more specifically Russia’s “boundless” (or “unfathomable”) spaces – in Russian *neob’iatnye prostranstva*. Whilst it was comparably “easy” for Russia, so Berdiaev, to acquire these areas, it has proved far more difficult for her to “organise” them. Extensive efforts were required simply to keeping them together, without solving Russia’s spatial challenges in a satisfactory way. The energy spent on the vast spaces did not pay off, Berdiaev maintains, and Russian geography remains unorganised.

From the first moment, we see that Berdiaev’s statements on this issue are very general; they hardly relate to any specific issues concerning the mastering of space, such as the

challenges for imperial government in this or that region. He highlights neither specific areas nor periods, referring instead to one immense uniform Russian space without regional specifics or temporal development (Sokologorsky 2007). His boundless Russia thereby assumes a mythical character, rather than a historical, concrete one.

The conquering of vast areas without attaining full mastery of them resulted, in turn, not only in an unorganised national space; according to Berdiaev, this process also significantly influenced the Russian mind itself. Confronted with its boundless space the Russian mind became just as boundless and chaotic as the landscape. And since the organisation of the vast Russian spaces proved impossible, the Russian soul experienced equally huge difficulties in organising itself. The Russian people did not manage to channel its energies, its creativity and creative output, into clear “forms.”

The Russian soul is stifled (*podavlena*) by the boundless fields and the boundless Russian snow, it sinks and dissolves in this boundlessness. The shaping of its soul and the shaping of its creativity was for the Russian human being hampered. The genius of form is not a Russian genius, with difficulties it adapts (*sovmeshchaetsia*) to the power of spaces over the soul. And Russians almost hardly know the pleasures of form. (Berdiaev 2007, 69–70)

Thus, in Russia, the inability to organise space led to an inability to organise the self. Berdiaev presents this as a causal relationship. The Russian psychology became increasingly unable to self-organise as the size of the Russian state increased. Whilst this implies that some boundless character of the soul must have been present from the outset – Berdiaev notes at one point the “Slavic chaos” that reigns in the Russian people – it was first and foremost the Russian imperial conquest that prevented the evolution of forms, which Berdiaev repeatedly referred to. The boundless character of the Russian mind should therefore, Berdiaev seems to suggest, not be regarded as an essential trait, but rather as a detrimental outcome that is not necessarily the final word about Russia. Rather, the task that emerges from these speculations is to provide Russia with form – to develop a specifically Russian form of creative work. This will represent a liberation of Russian creativity from its psychological repression by the Russian land. And whilst the efforts devoted to securing Russian land from invaders stifled the Russian people, the future mastering of space, Berdiaev maintains, will enable the mastering of creativity as well.

A key implication of Berdiaev’s reasoning here is that human, and Russian, agency matters. “The Power of Spaces over the Russian Soul” reads as an appeal to take control over both space and soul. The fact that Berdiaev thereby assigns a task to his readers apparently contradicts the providentialist understanding of history by which his thought was otherwise informed at the time. He saw the war (and later the Revolution) as divine punishment (Stroop, 2013). In Berdiaev’s writings on space, however, Russia’s deficiencies are not presented as divine retribution. Rather, they lead to a task that comes so to speak from within – from Russia’s own history and contingencies. The Russian people could and should take responsibility instead of letting itself be stifled by the boundless land surrounding them. The people is capable of liberating itself. For Berdiaev, the war and its upheavals was precisely a situation that made this liberation possible.

The demands with which the World War presents Russia should lead to a radical change of the consciousness of the Russian human being and the direction of its will. It should finally free itself from the power of spaces and by itself master

the spaces, without thereby changing the Russian uniqueness that is connected with the Russian vastness. (Berdiaev 2007, 72)

This means that Russians should actively seek to master the spaces, not simply liberate themselves from them. The spaces could, when controlled properly, generate new energy – not “German energy,” Berdiaev emphasises, but a “Russian” one. Nevertheless, in “The Power of Spaces over the Russian Soul,” notions such as form and energy are closely associated with Germany, the main antagonist in the ongoing war. The German character represents discipline, organisation, clearly focused activity and creativity. At the very end of the essay, Berdiaev somewhat paradoxically suggests that the captivity that throughout the text has been associated with the boundless spaces is also connected with things German (*nemechina*). And the imminent mastering of space will likewise represent liberation from “German slavery.” Where this German slavery comes in is not very clear, but Berdiaev suggests in passing that it stems from the state as a German form imposed on Russia. Thus, Berdiaev seems to call for both an (anarchic) liberation from the state and for the introduction of new, indigenous Russian forms.

This suggests that it is Germany (rather than Europe, the West or any other specific country) that represents the main other, on which Berdiaev’s ideas about Russia is clearly dependent. Sometimes Germany serves as a model for liberation, as for instance when Berdiaev describes how properly the German puts everything into order. At the same time, Russia must liberate itself from Germany. This ambiguous attitude to Germany was not unique to Berdiaev. In identity discourses of late imperial Russia, the “German” represented an imaginary “master” from whom Russian intellectuals, explicitly or implicitly describing themselves as “slaves” (cf. Hegel), continuously sought recognition. However, since recognition from an imaginary master per definition is impossible, the lack of recognition would often lead to resentment (Suslov 2014). In Berdiaev’s wartime texts, the explicit issue at stake is not so much a quest for recognition as an attempt at liberation from a quasi-colonial dependency. The emphasis on “form” and “energy” as faculties possessed by Germans, but not yet by Russians, testifies to this dependency.

The brief suggestion in “The Power of Spaces over the Russian Soul” that Russian culture lacks form, also harks back to the first and major essay of the *Fate of Russia* collection, the “Soul of Russia.” Here, Berdiaev developed his well-known antinomic approach to Russia, i.e. a series of antithetic statements about Russia that are all claimed to be equally true, so that Russia can be regarded as made up of a sum of opposing statements. For our purposes here, Berdiaev’s first antinomy is particularly relevant. According to this antinomy, Russia is 1) The most anti-state and apolitical, anarchic country in the world, and 2) the most state-oriented bureaucratic country of all. The latter “fact” is for Berdiaev the result of German influence: Since Russia lacks its own formative “logos,” it has adopted the German one.

Moreover, form, or “logos,” is discussed by Berdiaev in gendered terms – as a masculine faculty or feature. The “logos” that Russia has imported is German masculinity. According to Berdiaev (2007, 26), Russia has “chosen the wrong bridegroom” (*oshiblas’ v zhenikhe*), and a proper “marriage” has therefore not taken place: “Bride Russia” still waits for her proper bridegroom.

By adopting a gendered view on Russia’s characteristic traits and deficiencies – Russia is feminine and even too feminine – Berdiaev engages in a way of describing Russia, which had become prominent by the 1910s. One of the main proponents of this idea at

the turn of the twentieth century was Vasiliï Rozanov, though this perspective may be traced back to Petr Chaadaev, who, like Berdiaev, criticised his homeland from a European, “masculine” point of view for not having become part of the culture of reason, or “logos” (Aizlewood 2000). Rozanov, by contrast, adored Russia’s “feminine passivity,” but for Berdiaev as for Chaadaev both Russia’s excessive “femininity” and the influence of German “masculinity” represented a problem. Thus, neither pure femininity nor masculinity was desirable. What he pleaded for was rather their synthesis (Riabov 2001, 140). In general, Berdiaev promoted his gendered view of Russia actively in his wartime texts, after first having made the suggestion in his writings on Russian literature, for instance in his 1910 essay on Andrei Bely’s novel *The Silver Dove* (Rutten 2010, 95).

Berdiaev’s take on masculinity suggested that he discerned a conflict in the Russian mind itself between a Russian and German component, and in the second part of the “Soul of Russia” essay, Berdiaev turned to the struggle between the “Slavic and German races.” According to Berdiaev, Russia both as a state and as a culture has for a long time been “Germanised,” and the reason why this could happen is precisely that German culture is predominantly masculine whereas Russian culture is feminine. For Berdiaev, the world war had made this conflict explicit, and also demonstrated its devastating consequences. Berdiaev’s proposal was to develop a new indigenous Russian masculinity. For Berdiaev this implied, however, that Russia would have to imitate Germany in order to discover its own, “inner masculinity.” It should no longer be a slave of Germany, but rather try to make Western Europe “immanent,” i.e. incorporate it into the new Russia. In this productive acquisition was the renewing potential of the war as he saw it: The war might enable a shift in the global power balance, liberating Russia from German masculinity (slavery) and making Russia not just independent, but also the new universal synthesis of East and West.

In order to achieve this new world order, then, Russia would need to develop its own masculinity, i.e. to organise itself in a new and different way. Abundance of femininity combined with the absence of an indigenous masculinity is presented by Berdiaev as the explanation for the antinomic character that he ascribes to Russia, and which he at this point saw as a problem calling for a solution. The antinomies testify to the dependency on things foreign, such as masculinity (Berdiaev 2007, 32). Although space as such is not brought up in the “Soul of Russia” essay, it is part and parcel of what Berdiaev during the First World War diagnosed as Russia’s main problem: it was too impulsive, too boundless. The spaces were not the sole cause for this, but it had significantly prevented the acceptance of responsibility and creative action. Russian agency had to be restored, or perhaps even created anew.

### **The Meaning of Space in Russian Pre-Revolutionary Culture**

Berdiaev’s perspective on Russian space during the First World War was first and foremost critical: the Russian inability of mastering its boundless spaces had a set of negative effects on Russian thought and intellectual life. The Russian space represented a problem that needed to be solved and however idiosyncratic Berdiaev’s thoughts were, similar critical views, according to which space represented an uncanny dimension that alienated Russia from world civilisation, had been advocated by several prominent Russian thinkers and scholars before him.

The key word that Berdiaev used to describe the Russian space – and soul – was “boundless” (*neob’iatnye*). This phrase might have been adopted from Nikolai Gogol (Ingold 2009: 23). At the end of Gogol’s *Dead Souls* we find probably the most famous formulation of Russian space as boundless. The wide landscape through which the main protagonist’s troika travels hastily arouses the narrator’s anxiety, but also gives birth to the idea that this vast space corresponds to a set of faculties of the Russian mind. “What does this immense expanse (*neob’iatnyi prostor*) portend? Is it not here, in you, that some boundless thought (*bespredel’naia mysl’*) should be born, since you yourself is without end?” (Gogol 1998: 226). However, the space and time (future) of the riding troika, which during the final pages of the novel becomes an emblem for Russia, remained unknown for the narrator.

By the time Gogol published his *Dead Souls*, Petr Chaadaev had already brought up a similar issue in his “Apology of a Madman,” written in 1837, where he reached a seemingly opposite conclusion. In this text, Chaadaev sustained his Eurocentric view from the scandalous first philosophical letter that had been published the year before, that Russia had so far existed in isolation from “true” history, understood by Chaadaev as a dynamically developing Christian civilisation, continually stimulated by religious or religiously coloured ideas, a tradition with which he explicitly identified. History and historicity were for Chaadaev the key to originality and identity, and Russia had none of this (Groys 1992). However, Chaadaev went on, how could it be that Russia remained outside history and yet was so immense and seemingly so powerful? Russia’s greatness, Chaadaev concluded, is mere coincidence – it is a “material” or “geographical fact,” and not a “historical” one. Russia is geography and not history (Chaadaev 1991, 294–295). For Chaadaev, space was an empty signifier and served merely to create the illusion of Russian greatness. Chaadaev, thus, used the opposition of history to geography as a variant of the more traditional opposition of spirit (ideas) to matter (or material basis) (Peskov 2007, 24).

By implication, when Gogol was speculating on whether the boundless Russian space might correspond to new and daring Russian thinking, Chaadaev had already rejected this idea. However, it is also possible to read Gogol as a careful suggestion that the Russian geography might contain a potential that Chaadaev, due to his Eurocentric point of view, had been unable to see. From this perspective, Gogol becomes one of several thinkers who felt challenged by Chaadaev to work out a more positive vision of Russia, the Slavophiles of the 1840s being the most prominent example. At the same time, Chaadaev’s Apology also contained a tempting suggestion, namely that Russia, despite the lack of a past (he continued to insist on this), might be a *tabula rasa* with a prosperous, glorious future. Whilst this passage has later been eagerly emphasised in the historiography of Russian thought, Chaadaev’s suggestion was indeed vague, and the Apology remained unfinished, ending abruptly after the beginning of its second part, which was to be devoted precisely to the “geographical fact.” All he succeeds in saying in the remaining fragment is that geography makes up all of Russia’s history and determines the character of its social life, “being both the essential element of our political greatness and the true reason for our intellectual powerlessness” (Chaadaev 1991, 304).

Chaadaev saw the world as divided into two parts, East and West. In the Apology, he activates the orientalist binary opposition of the West as active and historically dynamic and the East as static, passive and submissive. This opposition he, in turn, mapped onto

another opposition – that between time and space, where Eastern time is seen as space and thus devoid of dynamism, whilst Western space is seen as dynamic, i.e. as time (Turoma 2010: 141–142). Russia is, according to Chaadaev, neither East nor West, but rather a “land of the north” (Chaadaev 1991, 297). Intellectually, however, it is clearly closer to the East as Chaadaev defined it. In Chaadaev’s Apology, the geographical fact of vast territories does by no means correspond to any “vast” thoughts, at least not in the sense of bold and daring ideas, but rather to the absence of thought. As Nancy Condee has argued, Chaadaev’s description of Russia as despotic, backward, lazy, unhistorical etc. is classic orientalism. By implication, however, the description, which was initially written in French, is also self-orientalising – “as if to shame itself out of the very practices it had newly learned to condemn from an Orientalizing West” (Condee 2009, 27). Berdiaev likewise conceptualised Russia by and large as a homogenous space without history, where the domination of space had excluded the formation of truly intellectual life, in particular in comparison to Germany. “Time” (history) and “space” apparently excluded one another for Berdiaev, too. Thus, his wartime description of a feminine Russia without its own masculine logos could be regarded as a form of self-orientalism in the tradition of Chaadaev.

In the mid-nineteenth century, space continued to represent a problem for Russian intellectuals. The historian Sergei Solov’ev’s view of Russian history as developing according to the logic of universal history, may be described as westernising. It meant, more specifically, that historical development was made up of the transition from clan via militia to state. In Russia, however, this process had been delayed, and the explanation Solov’ev provided for the fact that Russia was Europe and yet so different from Europe was precisely the vast spaces that the Russian state had conquered in the past. Russia’s historical development had been retarded by geographical factors. Solov’ev described Russia’s natural milieu as its “evil stepmother” (*machekha*), i.e. as a set of unfavourable conditions that had hindered historical progress on Russian soil (Solov’ev 1962, 8). He defined Russian history as a history of colonisation, and the negative effects of this history had temporarily separated it from the rest of Europe. More specifically, the Russian people had been forced to continually migrate and therefore remain on a quasi-sedentary, half-nomadic level for longer periods than West-Europeans (Bassin 1993). Thus, Solov’ev also saw time as opposed to space inasmuch as he associated time with the West – historical development as such was widely celebrated as a positive feature in the age of historicism – and space with the static East.

A much more positive vision of Russia’s boundless spaces is encountered at the turn of the twentieth century in the writings of Dmitrii Mendeleev, who, in Nick Baron’s words, “strove to remap Russian imperial territory as a modern rational space that could serve as a framework for the nation’s balanced, self-sufficient economic, social, and cultural modernization” (Baron 2013, 106). The main tasks in Mendeleev’s view were not further expansion – he believed that Russia had reached its “natural” limits – but careful and thoroughly planned utilisation of these vast spaces for the sake of the nation’s future prosperity. And Mendeleev was very optimistic on behalf of Russia’s capability for modernising its imperial space, an optimism that was grounded in his faith in science and rational analysis. In this respect he was very far from Berdiaev, but the scientist and the speculative philosopher shared the idea that Russia, which both understood as a predominantly European country, should in the future become a bridge over the

“thousand-year divide between Asia and Europe.” By accomplishing this, Russia would bring together the two separate worlds on the Eurasian continent – that of progressive European individualism on the one hand and of static Asian state-formation on the other (Mendeleev 1907, 146). More generally, Berdiaev shared with Mendeleev, again in Baron’s apt formulation, an “obsession with space as a problem to be solved” (Baron 2013, 108). This preoccupation inscribed them into a broader intellectual context of late imperial Russia, be it represented by Vladimir Lenin or Andrei Bely, who in different ways and for different reasons saw Russia as being in need of a reorganisation and rationalisation of its space. A common enthusiasm for such spatial tasks for the future appears to have been widespread in Russia when the First World War broke out.

### **The post-Revolutionary Berdiaev’s Redefinition of Space**

As suggested above, the essay on “The Power of Spaces over the Russian Soul” in *The Fate of Russia* did also contain statements that opened up for an interpretation different from the one I proposed earlier: Since Russian imperial expansion had been unable to tame the “Slavic chaos,” one might as well say that the Russian soul thereby acquired a geography that perfectly mirrored it. The Russian mind is just as essentially “wide” as the Russian land is, and because of extensive expansion it would *remain* just as boundless as it was from the beginning, perhaps even more. Still, this was not Berdiaev’s main perspective in his wartime writings. In this period, as I have argued above, spatial organisation was first and foremost a problem and a task that called for a solution different from predominant practices of the past. A genuine change would require the invention of an indigenous masculinity within the otherwise feminine Russia. Gradually, however, Berdiaev would cease to see Russia’s boundless spaces as a problem to be solved. Instead, he began to see the “unfathomable” character as a positive, essential feature, which ultimately testified to Russia’s messianic calling. As noted above, a belief in Russian messianism had been present in his writings at least since around 1910, but it had thus far not been related to the Russian landscape. After the war and the 1917 revolutions, however, Berdiaev appears to have discovered an even deeper correspondence between space and soul.

In the summer of 1918, Berdiaev wrote the book *Philosophy of Inequality*, which remained unpublished until 1923, a year after he had been expelled from his homeland by the new Bolshevik regime. The book was a critique of the Revolution and a defence of “inequality,” in the form of a plea for individual freedom against the “oppression” of the “dark masses.” In other words, this book contained an aristocratic, elitist attack on the Russian people. Here, in contrast to some earlier writings, Berdiaev was critical of messianism, be it Jewish or Russian. Moreover, he maintained the gendered view on Russia as devoid of its “own bridegroom,” and a “true marriage” with her partner (Berdiaev 1923, 19). An illustrative example of a “false bridegroom” was Peter the Great, whose foreign masculinity had led to a schism between the state and the people. In the nineteenth century the intelligentsia had turned to genuinely foreign bridegrooms such as Karl Marx, which led to the acquisition of alien and distorted perspectives on Russia. The absence of indigenous masculinity was a factor that Berdiaev at this point believed could explain the revolutionary chaos reigning in Russia. Its solution had to be sought in the creativity of representatives of high culture.



However, although Berdiaev maintained the feminine Russia’s inability to find its true corresponding masculinity, he did not relate the Revolution to the lack of organised space as he had done during the war, and he would soon begin to reconceptualise the meaning of space altogether, whilst abandoning the gendered framework of explanation applied earlier. This was part of a broader shift in his thinking about Russia and the West. Already from 1919 onwards he emerged with a stronger faith in the Russian people. Inspired by Oswald Spengler, he would now instead put the blame for the reigning worldwide crises on European culture. Already prior to his emigration he had returned to his previous messianism and even taken up a Slavophile worldview (Burbank 1986, 193–208).

Another post-revolutionary, pre-émigré text by Berdiaev was *Dostoevsky’s Worldview*, which he wrote in the years 1920–1921, and which also emerged in print only in 1923. No thinker had a more profound impact on Berdiaev, as he saw it himself, than Dostoevsky (Berdiaev 1949, 91, 193). The reasons were several: Berdiaev adored Dostoevsky’s dialectical exploration of the human mind, his non-systematic way of thinking philosophically, his understanding of Christianity, and not least the alleged Russian character of everything Dostoevsky wrote and did. Dostoevsky was for Berdiaev the main key to Russia. The Russianness of Dostoevsky was discussed explicitly in a chapter of *Dostoevsky’s Worldview* simply named “Russia.” Here, Berdiaev returned to his own vision of the “Russian soul” with which he was so fascinated. Characteristically, as Berdiaev saw it, Dostoevsky both put the Russian soul prominently on display in his works and was himself a prominent example of this soul. In Dostoevsky, we encounter the contradictory, or antinomic (though Berdiaev does not use this term here), tendencies that Berdiaev sees as defining of Russia in general. For instance, Dostoevsky’s oeuvre is filled with both humility and pride. We see this in his portrayal of his characters as well as in his non-fictional writings. Likewise, his thought is pan-European and universalistic, and at the same time anti-European and nationalistic. Thus, Russian national self-awareness according to Berdiaev knows no moderation, no maturity, no firmness. These observations led him, in the associative manner that is so characteristic of him, to the Russian landscape. In comparison with what he wrote in *The Fate of Russia*, however, the relationship between space and soul has now been reversed. Whereas the soul was previously seen as having been formed by the landscape, Berdiaev now suggests that the landscape mirrors the soul instead.

In the geography of the Russian land there exists a correspondence with the geography of the Russian soul. The structure of the land, the geography of the nation is always merely the symbolic expression of the structure of a people’s soul, merely the geography of the soul. All the outer is always merely an expression of the inner, it is merely a symbol of the spirit. (Berdiaev 1994, 106)

Thus, Russian geography according to Berdiaev of the early 1920s is an expression of the Russian soul, which in turn makes it an expression of the “formless national element” (*neoformlennaia national’naia stikhiia*), or simply of Russianness. Although he maintains that Russians have struggled to master these spaces, this is not so much a sign of the incapability of imperial rule, but rather a testimony to some deeper interconnection between the wide open spaces and a specifically Russian mentality that is constantly striving further. For Berdiaev this “striving further” means that the Russian mind is apocalyptic, it is oriented towards the ultimate end – not only in space but also in time

(history). Berdiaev puts this apocalyptic Russian soul in firm opposition to the “fortress” that the disciplined European human being represents.

As it turned out, the First World War did not bring about any new Russian masculinity in terms of a clearer organisation of space and soul. Instead it unleashed revolutionary forces. Although Berdiaev regarded the Revolution as divine punishment, he would gradually also come to see it as an expression of Russian apocalyptic otherworldly yearnings. His book on Dostoevsky demonstrates that he by now had ceased to criticise the Russian people for its inability to self-organise, and instead searched for a positive meaning of Russia’s alleged formless and spontaneous character. Instead of criticising formless Russian thinking, he discerned a perfect match between the Russian landscape and Russian apocalyptic thought, a belief that was far more essentialist than the views he had held during the war. Although he made extensive use of gendered stereotypes to characterise nations, his Russia of the 1910s was still capable of change.

The line of development outlined above suggests that the post-revolutionary and subsequently émigré Berdiaev would become less critical of Russia and Russian history than the pre-revolutionary Berdiaev had been. I would claim that this is the main tendency, although there are well-known exceptions to this pattern. His famous book *The Origin of Russian Communism* (1937) did also bring up the problem of spatial organisation in a way similar to his First World War writings. The abundance of space was at least one (of several) explanations for what he sought to describe in this book: the tradition of Russian despotic statehood and Russian totalitarian yearnings from the late Middle Ages to Bolshevism (Siljak 2016).

The immensity of Russia, the absence of boundaries, was expressed in the structure of the Russian soul. The landscape of the Russian soul corresponds with the landscape of Russia, the same boundlessness, formlessness, reaching out into infinity, breadth. [...] It might be said that the Russian people fell a victim to the immensity of its territory. Form does not come to it easily, the gift of form is not great among the Russians. Russian historians explain the despotic character of Russian government by this necessary organization of the boundless Russian plain. (Berdiaev 1937, 9)

At the same time, we see that Berdiaev here remained true to his post-revolutionary view of soul and space as first and foremost reflecting one another, rather than resulting from one another.

Berdiaev’s late work *The Russian Idea* (1946), however, which by and large covers the same issues and figures as *The Origin of Russian Communism*, comes closer again to the messianic perspective that was encountered in his works of the early 1920s. In the opening of *The Russian Idea*, the Russian people is defined as a “polarised people,” an idea for which Berdiaev refers to his own “Soul of Russia” essay written three decades earlier. However, polarisation is presented now as an essential trait and not as the result of absent masculinity. In the list of Russian contradictions or antinomies in the opening of the work, the femininity/masculinity problem is left out entirely, while at the very end of the book Berdiaev proclaims that Russia has always (!) possessed its own masculinity, of which the Second World War victory over Germany was the most recent confirmation (Berdiaev 1946, 254). The antinomic character remains present, testifying now, however, to the eternal strivings and yearnings of the Russian people. By implication, Russia possesses a landscape that suits the Russian soul perfectly, and this is a relationship that

is much more fundamental than its imperial history. According to Berdiaev, the soul is unable to master the landscape because the two correspond too neatly to one another.

There is a correlation between the immensity, the borderlessness, the endlessness of the Russian land and the Russian soul, between the physical geography and the geography of the soul. In the soul of the Russian people there is the same sort of immensity, borderlessness, yearning for endlessness as in the Russian plain. For this reason it has been difficult for the Russian people to master these vast spaces and provide them with form. (Berdiaev 1946, 6)

This description finds, in turn, a correlation in the messianism of the Russian people, which is the central issue in *The Russian Idea* – both as a theme in Russian thought and as a “fact,” i.e. in Berdiaev’s own belief. Decisively more essentialist than his writings of the 1910s, *The Russian Idea* took the utopianism so characteristic of modern Russian thought – both secular and religious – as a confirmation that the Russian people is a chosen people. In Berdiaev’s speculative historiography, Russian ideas of the past such as brotherhood and communitarianism become a “Russian idea” or a mission for the future: to demonstrate true brotherhood and communitarianism to the rest of the world. For Berdiaev, the outcome of the Second World War was the most recent proof of his world historical vision of such a mission (Mjør 2011, 245–250). Thus, in addition to political events, a social history filled with extraordinary suffering and an intellectual history of utopianism, Berdiaev would find another confirmation for Russia’s calling in its own landscape.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Berdiaev’s attitude to Bolshevism was ambiguous. According to his 1937 book on its origins, the Soviet regime was despotic and totalitarian but also (or therefore) a continuation of what he saw as indigenous Russian traditions. By the same token, *The Russian Idea* postulates an eternal Russia, albeit with a stronger emphasis on its positive values, which were also preserved by the Soviet Union, not least after the victory in the Second World War. Berdiaev was not the only Russian émigré who encountered difficulties in trying to figure out how to relate to the Soviet Union in this new, post-war situation, and he emerged after the war as supportive of the Soviet regime, at least for a short while.

For the Bolsheviks of 1922, the religious idealist Berdiaev was a *persona non grata*, and his ideas could be freely debated in Russia again only with the onset of perestroika. In the meantime the only accepted attitude to his thought was condemning criticism from a materialist point of view. However, the positive, idealising visions of Russian space that Berdiaev developed from the early 1920s onwards find, paradoxically, a parallel in the new attention that the Soviet regime, during the same decade, began to draw to its own territories as a symbol of its power, as these areas became consolidated as a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Although a genuine appropriation and domestication of this territory remained a task also for the new regime, it replaced the pre-revolutionary focus on space as a “problem to be solved” with a widespread celebration of its “boundless space” – *neob’atnyi prostor* – which made up “one-sixth of the world.” The vastness of the Soviet Union soon became and would remain crucial for Soviet identity formation (Widdis 2003; Turoma 2013). By implication, Soviet discourse developed a spatial

imagination that had many parallels to that of the idealist Berdiaev, who for his part continued to write about the meanings of Russian space throughout his émigré life.

Berdiaev's preoccupation with space in the situation of war and dissolution in 1915 may suggest that these are the moments when space becomes important to one's identity. Post-Soviet Russia provides a similar situation of dissolution and loss of faith in progress, and recent scholarly literature has emphasised the productivity of spatial imagination in post-Soviet identity discourses (Clowes 2011), suffice it to mention the current ubiquity of notions such as "Eurasia," "The Russian World," or "Russian Civilisation." As this article has shown, however, space is not new to Russian identity formation, but has been central to previous moments of both rupture and increasing stability. Berdiaev's thinking about Russian space extends across one such significant event – the collapse of the empire, the revolution and emigration – and went through a significant transformation from a critical perspective to a far more affirmative one. This shift coincided with the transition from Imperial Russia to the Soviet Union, which likewise inaugurated a more active and affirmative use of space as a means to identity formation. Remarkably though, Berdiaev's own transformed attitude to the "boundless spaces" of his homeland did not involve the replacement of old concepts and phrases with new ones, but was achieved rather by a re-semanticising of the same vocabulary for the purpose of new messianic speculations.

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