



Finding Evald Ilyenkov

How a Soviet philosopher who stood up
for dialectics continues to inspire

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About the author

Corinna Lotz has been drawn to Ilyenkov's ideas and personality since first encountering his work in the 1980s. She writes about theory, art, culture and politics for the Real Democracy Movement. With Monica Lemos and Signe Juhl-Nørgaard she has been co-organising International Friends of Ilyenkov since 2012.

Author's note

This booklet has focused on the Anglophone and Nordic reception of Ilyenkov's work. There has not been time or space to do justice to researchers in Brazil, Ecuador, Turkey, Greece and elsewhere who are taking forward Ilyenkov's philosophical enterprise in the 21st century.

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Introduction

A philosopher who set out to change the world

Evald Vasilyevich Ilyenkov was one of the most remarkable figures in 20th century philosophy. Unlike most philosophers, not only did he interpret the world – he also set about changing it in the most challenging of circumstances.

Born in 1924 in Smolensk in the young Soviet Union, the legacy of Ilyenkov's post-war struggles with the Stalinist authorities cannot be underestimated. Although the USSR is no more, Ilyenkov's impact in Europe and beyond continues to extend into the fields of philosophy, psychology and pedagogy as well as revolutionary politics. Canadian philosopher David Bakhurst believes that he is “one of the most – perhaps *the* most – significant philosopher of the Soviet era”.

How this happened and how Ilyenkov became known in these circles is a veritable study in the dialectical twists and turns of history, both inside and outside the former Soviet Union. His emergence as an important 20th century thinker remains a process of becoming as new documents and writings are unearthed.

Ilyenkov and his co-thinkers were driven by a desire to rescue Marxism from the dead hand of Stalinist orthodoxy. The bureaucracy had transformed a philosophical outlook grounded in the development of the material world into a set of fixed truths, into a dogma that the Catholic Church might have recognised.

As cultural theorist and philosopher Vadim Mezhuev once said, paradoxically, “it was harder to be a Marxist in the Soviet Union than in any other country”.

After Stalin’s death in 1953, the generation that experienced the horrific struggles of World War II – Ilyenkov himself made it to Berlin – began a theoretical battle with dogma and thus with the authorities themselves.

In April 1954 Ilyenkov and his colleague Valentin Korovikov presented their ‘15 Theses’ on the relationship between philosophy, society and politics which blew apart official views. Yet it is only today, over 60 years later, that we can actually read the original text in Russian and English translation.

Not since Jewish-Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza wrote his *Theological-Political Treatise* in 1670 have seemingly abstract words on philosophy caused such hell to break out for their authors. Korovikov left philosophy to become a journalist, but Ilyenkov continued the struggle for a creative form of Marxism.

The Khrushchev thaw had given him hope but then the shutters came down again. Ilyenkov made an impassioned plea about the state of philosophy to the Central Committee on the eve of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, but it fell on deaf ears. Although his key book *Dialectical Logic* was published in 1974, he came under renewed fire within the Institute of Philosophy. Unable to bear the mental anguish, he died by his own hand in 1979.

The significance of his quarter-century long philosophical struggle only very slowly penetrated the Anglophone and Western world but its effect was powerful and it is still working its way through. Now, thanks to the collective efforts of scholars and activists, we can reconstruct, celebrate, and build on Ilyenkov’s contribution to philosophical thought and practice.

This booklet attempts to shed light on how he was discovered by Nordic, British, American and German researchers and revolutionary thinkers. I hope to trace how Ilyenkov's philosophical contribution coincided with their struggles, influenced and inspired them. And how, since the formation of the International Friends of Ilyenkov in 2012, researchers, pedagogues and political militants from many countries and backgrounds have been sharing their ideas and experiences at both academic and non-academic levels.

The Incendiary Theses

Ilyenkov's first big conflict with the Soviet authorities took place in 1954, a year after he completed his doctoral dissertation at Moscow State University (MGU). Ilyenkov and his comrade Valentin Korovikov's clash with the academic authorities has become legendary in the history of Soviet philosophy. In April of that year they wrote and presented their 'Theses on Philosophy' which caused an unholy storm. But, until recently, the text of the original 'Theses' had not seen the light of day. They are published in English for the first time this year in *Philosophical Thought in Russia in the second half of the 20th century*.¹

It was Ilyenkov's daughter Elena Illesh who finally discovered the original manuscript of the 'Theses' in the archives of the Russian Academy of Sciences in materials relating to the Institute of Philosophy, well over 60 years after they were written. She had only just published a reconstruction made from notes. Pursuing her research, she finally came across the original text. As David Bakhurst has said "it may be that the almost Gogolian elusiveness of the manuscript, turning up after its story had been told, enriched rather than hindered scholarship into the circumstances of its reception".

The Scientific Council of the Philosophy Faculty at Moscow State University passed no fewer than six resolutions denouncing the two young philosophy scholars, condemning them as

pernicious idealists for refusing to give up their heretical views. So what was so incendiary about the ‘Theses’? It was their insistence that philosophy’s task is to examine the process of thought itself, rather than taking concepts and categories for granted and as given formulae. In other words, Marxist philosophy is a theory of knowledge, not knowledge itself, and the task was to show how the material world in constant development manifests itself in thought.

Why was this such an explosive point of view? For the bureaucracy, reality was fixed. Socialism was “already existing” and therefore there was no need to consider further development, with all its attendant problems. Marx and Lenin had established absolute truths and no more study was necessary. It was simply a question of interpreting what had been said before.

Ilyenkov and Korovikov countered this with the proposition that the development of philosophy is a historical process, tracing it as a separate science which acquired “a specific subject matter and methods for the solution of its problems”. They referred to Friedrich Engels’ assertion that, after the development of the sciences, what remains for philosophy is “the study of the laws of the process of thought itself, logic and dialectics”.²

In their ‘Theses’ these bold Soviet philosophy students insisted on the need for a “relatively independent, specifically philosophical mode of investigation [that] emerges from the nature of ‘concrete’ that is, to use a more exact term, theoretical knowledge.” They emphasised that “universal forms of knowledge of real phenomena of nature and society, existing outside and independently of human beings, are given to us in sensation, contemplation and representation, and therefore, and only therefore, are *universal forms of these phenomena themselves*”. [emphasis in original]

The development of philosophical categories and concepts is asserted as an historical process and not the application of fixed forms (Marxist or otherwise) to an equally unchanging reality. The ‘Theses’ include a complex passage from Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature* in defence of their authors’ claim for philosophical thought as an independent discipline. Hegel says that physics on its own is inadequate and empirical experience is not its “final warrant and base”. Quoting Hegel in this way was a red rag to the entrenched bulls in Moscow State University’s Philosophy Faculty who had reduced philosophy to “a parade of examples illustrating things long known”.³

By March 1955 matters had heated up so much that the two philosophical culprits were accused of “dragging us into the realm of thinking”, Positivism, Trotskyism, Deborinism and Menshevism, idealism, Hegelianism and gnoseology, amongst various charges. By insisting on the need for philosophy as an independent scientific discipline, and on its crucial role as a theory of knowledge, the two rebels were breaking all the rules by which the Zombies (as Bakhurst has called them) of official Soviet philosophy kept things in their place.

In the reconstructed notes published by Elena Illesh, the inflammatory message becomes even clearer:

...These principles, these laws (*zakonomernosti*), characteristic of the present stage of theoretical thought must not be turned into blinkers, into categorical limits to the further development of thought.

If a researcher is convinced by the material that “certain laws, till now considered the *sine qua non* of cognising thought, need to be reconsidered, broadened, clarified, then

that is a completely normal and justified development of theoretical thought...”⁴

This was a society which was officially said to have achieved socialism. So examining the relationship between the “socialist ideal” and the reality on the ground only a year after the death of the dictator Stalin who had sent millions to their deaths, spelt extreme danger to those in power, whether in academe or in the top echelons of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).

Indeed, news of student unrest at the MGU had reached them and tensions mounted as the philosophy faculty as a whole came under fire. Encouraging students and others to examine what was going on around them was dangerous. Once they were encouraged to think for themselves, anything could happen, including the breakdown of a power which for its credibility relied on the mythologising of Marxism into an untouchable sacred text.

It became, as Bakhurst writes, “a battle for hearts and minds”.⁵ Heads began to roll. Korovikov was fired from the MGU in June and Ilyenkov was suspended from teaching. Worse might have happened, but in a twist of fate, in February 1956, the 20th Party Congress heard Khrushchev’s secret speech condemning Stalin’s crimes.

The Khrushchev era meant reforms at the Institute for Philosophy and a reprieve for Ilyenkov. The 1960s and early 1970s were to see the publication of some key writings and his involvement in the five-volume *Philosophical Encyclopaedia*, which included his unique definition of ‘The Ideal’ (1962).

The Brezhnev era

But Khrushchev's premiership only lasted until 1964. He was deposed, and reaction in the form of Leonid Brezhnev ushered in a long era of economic and political stagnation. The philosophical functionaries who objected to Ilyenkov's position bore down on him once more. In December 1967, the conflict over philosophy erupted again. Following an article in the youth newspaper, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, where Ilyenkov said that philosophy was the science of thought which contributed to "the culture of the intellect", a new witch-hunt was unleashed against him by the rector of the Moscow State University's philosophical faculty, W. S. Molodtsov. In anguish, Ilyenkov wrote a desperate letter to the Central Committee of the CPSU in which he did not hold back.

The letter, which languished for years in the archive of Ilyenkov's student Sergei Mareyev, was "On the state of philosophy". Through the lens of philosophy, Ilyenkov denounced the entire fiction of "real existing socialism" and said that as a result of the "ignorance of thinking" about Marx's method in writing *Capital* more was known about Western economies than the Soviet one. Ilyenkov insisted:

And here we have to admit – and it is quite clear for economists themselves – that we don't have the political economy of socialism, and there is no hope that we will have it if the situation remains the same. Elementary naivety, even just ignorance about the method of thinking with which K. Marx's *Capital* was developed, is extremely characteristic of economists, and above all for the leaders.

This fact is easy to demonstrate in the texts of their writings. The Marx-Lenin method is recognised (and even partially applied) by them where it is a question of a critical analysis of the ‘Western’ economy. Its applicability to the analysis of our economy is often denied even in a general form, not to mention the fact that in practice it has not been working for a long time and even more. As a result, we know the structure and patterns of the US or German economy better than the ‘anatomy and physiology’ of our own economic organism. Here – the fullest empiricism, the method of ‘trial and error’.⁶

As the Russian philosopher Andrey Maidansky has noted, it was only months before Soviet tanks rolled into the streets of Prague to crush the reform programme of “socialism with a human face” led by Alexander Dubcek and “Ilyenkov clearly saw where the wind of history was blowing”. Thus it was that Ilyenkov’s life mirrored as in a glass darkly the interaction between the sphere of ideas and philosophy with that of politics and society.

Ilyenkov’s battle against formulaic ‘Marxism’

Ilyenkov’s great crime had been to insist on a holistic, materialist-dialectical approach to thinking which, given the origins of the Soviet Union, should not have been an issue. However, in the Stalinist period, such thinking had been cast aside by a bureaucracy that saw in this approach a danger to their very existence as a privileged group in society.

So the philosophical approach of Marx, Lenin, Trotsky and others which had flourished in the early 1920s as rival intellectual approaches were tested in debate, was reduced by Soviet political and academic authorities in the Stalin period to empty formulae. Ilyenkov's philosophical approach – his theory of knowledge – taken as a whole, is that essence is cognisable through the formation of concepts in spiralling abstract and concrete moments of thought in our activity in the material world. The essence of things, processes or events is not discovered through comparing similar features, or as Ilyenkov put it by “endless wandering from one abstraction to another”. Rather it is by grasping objective concreteness, forming dynamic concepts and arriving at rich universals.

In his ground-breaking and controversial book, *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital* (1960), Ilyenkov drew out the underlying logic of Marx's methodology. He focused on the ascent of cognition from the abstract to the concrete as a way of penetrating the contradictory, moving essence of things. He outlined the dialectical relationship between the universal and the individual, setting out a materialist explanation of how human beings develop knowledge, contrasting dialectical and metaphysical approaches.

In combat against the metaphysical Cartesian dualism and Positivist scientism which dominated Soviet philosophy (and much of the West's), Ilyenkov turned to the monist standpoint of the 17th century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who held that thought was an attribute of substance. Spinoza provided the springboard for Ilyenkov's insight that consciousness arises in human beings as an expression of nature “acting on itself”. Controversially, he insisted on the identity of thought and being. In *Dialectical Logic* (1977), he untied what he called the

Gordian knot – the psychophysical problem, also known as the divide between thought and being – with the proposition that nature really performs through human beings.

In the introduction to *Dialectical Logic*, Ilyenkov uses barely coded language to criticise the official, formal acknowledgement of dialectics in a way that blocked off the acquisition of new knowledge. He wrote: “When dialectics is converted into a simple tool for proving a previously accepted (or given) thesis, it becomes a sophistry only outwardly resembling dialectics, but empty of content.” Sophistry, one should add, is usually taken to mean the use of false arguments, often with the intention to deceive. For Ilyenkov, on the contrary, dialectical logic was a universal scheme of “subjective activity creatively transforming nature”. And at the same time, it was a “universal scheme of the **changing** of any natural or socio-historical material in which this activity is fulfilled”. [emphasis added]

While contradiction as the “concrete unity of mutually exclusive opposites” was the “real nucleus of dialectics”, there was a deeper, more significant question, which he poses in *Dialectical Logic*: “Can and should an objective contradiction find reflection in thought? And if so, in what form?” Ilyenkov argues against the formal logic view that contradiction is resolved in the thought process, as something that has to be eliminated.

For support he turned to Marx and the development of his labour theory of value in *Capital*. Ilyenkov writes:

In *Capital* these antinomies [e.g. use value/exchange value] are not done away with at all as something subjective, but prove to be understood, i.e. have been sublated in the body of a deeper and more concrete theoretical conception. In other words, they

are preserved but have lost the character of logical contradictions, having been converted into abstract moments of the concrete conception of economic reality. And there is nothing surprising in that; any concrete, developing system includes contradictions as the principle of its self-movement and as the form in which the development is cast.

In *Dialectical Logic*, Ilyenkov maintained that this approach was the real gist of Lenin's thesis on the identity "of dialectics, logic and the theory of knowledge of the modern, scientific. i.e. materialist, world outlook". Understood in that way, dialectical logic could also be the genuine science of the "reflection of the movement of the world in the movement of concepts". This was his pointed riposte to the Positivists inside the academy.

Ilyenkov worked for an understanding of the Ideal as independent of individual human consciousness. This was (and is) in opposition to the view that the Ideal and Ideality are psychological, neurological constructs of individual consciousness. He did this by building on Hegel, Marx and Lenin's critiques of Kantian and Positivist thinkers of his time.

Ideals arise and continue to exist through historical, collective human activity. The human individual forms and shapes and humanises herself by her practical activities in the context of the society which includes a whole range of ideal forms. Ideals are part of human social being and exist outside and beyond individuals or social classes. The Ideal is internally contradictory. It exists in a negated way within the individual but also has an independent existence outside the individual. It is objective because it is not the property of, nor does it arise from, one individual's actions in the world – it is the objective form of the whole social existence of human beings.⁷

Ilyenkov's last work, *Leninist Dialectics and the Metaphysics of Positivism*, was an impassioned defence of Lenin's 1908 book *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*. He used Lenin's authority as a protective cover to oppose the Zombies who dominated philosophical teaching in Brezhnev's Soviet Union. No wonder the book was heavily censored before its publication in 1979 as Maidansky discovered, when he compared Ilyenkov's original with the version published by Politizdat.⁸

Ilyenkov tested out his theories about the nature of Ideality and the formation of the human being by participating in the education of children with dual sensory impairment. He collaborated with his friend, the psychologist Alexander Meshcheryakov, at the Zagorsk (today's Sergiev Posad) children's school to test out his belief that all human beings have innate capacities and talents and that the formation of an individual human personality arises through sensuous, social activity with physical objects. This involves upbringing and education in a world distinct from the physical one, the ideal realm of culture. The success of Zagorsk students continues to be seen as evidence of an educational breakthrough.⁹

Notes

1 E.V. Ilyenkov and V. I. Korovikov 'Theses on the Question of the Interconnection of Philosophy and Knowledge of Nature and Society in the Process of their Historical Development', Appendix II, 'Punks versus Zombies' by David Bakhurst.

2 This point was also made by Corinna Lotz and Gerry Gold in 'God's last Stand: Matter, God and the New Physics. A review essay of the popular books of cosmologist Paul Davies' *Socialist Future*, Spring 1996 Vol.4 No. 4 and in *Nature, Society and Thought*, May 1996 Vol.9 No. 2. <http://www.aworldtowin.net/resources/godslaststand.html>

3 Bakhurst (2019) p. 56

- 4 Bakhurst (2019) p.76
- 5 Bakhurst (2019) p.61
- 6 <http://caute.ru/ilyenkov/texts/epis/ckp.html>
- 7 Corinna Lotz & Penny Cole 'Deconstructing Neoliberal Hegemony'
<https://internationalfriendsofilyenkov.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/deconstructing-neoliberal-hegemony2.pdf>
- 8 Email from Maidansky to author.
- 9 <http://www.aworldtowin.net/reviews/Meshcheryakov.html>
<https://www.e-flux.com/video/204466/thinking-matter-thinking-body-talking-hands-film-screening-and-talks-with-emanuel-almborg-maria-chehonadskih-and-alexei-penzin/>

Finding Ilyenkov

Ilyenkov wanted to reach out to philosophers beyond the Soviet Union. Despite being awarded the prestigious Chernyshevsky prize in 1965 for his research, his voice was smothered for decades at home and abroad. He took part in Hegel congresses held in Salzburg and Prague, but was prevented from attending international conferences, notably the 1966 Symposium, Marx and the Western World, held at Notre Dame University in the US.¹

Ill health prevented him from attending the International Hegel Conference which took place in Moscow in 1974. According to his student and biographer Aleksey Novokhatko he was too “exhausted by the campaign waged against him by the then head of the Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Philosophy”.

During his lifetime, many of Ilyenkov’s key writings remained unpublished in Russian. A few foreign language editions, notably in Italian, spurred on publication within the Soviet Union.² Those that finally appeared in print suffered heavy alterations and cuts. Only four articles³ by him appeared in Anglophone publications before 1977.

Until the appearance of *Dialectical Logic* that year, Ilyenkov’s work remained virtually unknown outside his homeland except by Sovietologists or Marxologists who scoured obscure journals. How many people, for example,

would have noticed 'Ideals', an entry by Ilyenkov, V. Murian and S. Ikonnikova in the 1962 *Soviet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, which appeared in the English language magazine *Soviet Studies in Philosophy* in 1965? That entry was an impassioned defence of a materialist interpretation of Hegel's dialectical Ideal. The authors staked their claim, asserting that:

History shows that such ideals as the prohibition of contradiction and the categorical imperative were not at all those for which the history of mankind strove from the very outset. On the contrary, contradiction was always the motive force for the development of the intellect in the field of theory.

But dogma of the Marxist variety – or indeed of any other variety – was not confined to the USSR, and Ilyenkov's battle against scholasticism, his struggle to develop Marxist thought, was to find its way to the minds and hearts of thinkers and practitioners outside the Soviet Union. The materiality of his approach was such that Ilyenkov's studies would resonate in the minds of scholars as well as political activists.

In 1977 an abridged version of Ilyenkov's 1962 essay 'The Concept of the Ideal' was translated into English. It appeared in a compilation called *Philosophy in the USSR – Problems of Dialectical Materialism*. More crucially, that same year, readers outside the USSR could buy, at a low price, the first book by Ilyenkov to be translated into English – *Dialectical Logic, essays on its history and theory*. It was issued by Progress Books, the USSR's foreign language publishing house in a modest pocket-sized format.

Also in 1977 an English translation of Romanian philosopher-mathematician Anton Dumitriu's *History of Logic*, published by Abacus Press in Tunbridge Wells, a small town in southern England, contained a buried reference to Ilyenkov's *Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital*, possibly its first mention in any book in English. It was to be another five years before Ilyenkov's challenging analysis appeared in English, more than a quarter of a century after he first defended his doctoral dissertation in 1956 upon which the book is based.

In 1978 readers of *Sputnik*, the English-language youth magazine run by the Soviet press agency Novosti, might have spotted Ilyenkov's rousing appeal *Learn to think while you are young*. But apart from that, it was only rarely that people, apart from Russian-reading individuals such as Susan Welsh in the United States, who scanned Russian-language journals for a left-wing magazine, could read anything by Ilyenkov. She was impressed by his blast against Pavlovian psychology in *Kommunist*, the theoretical journal of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Ilyenkov provoked an uproar in 1968, she realised, among the state-sponsored Pavlovians "when he wrote in the official philosophy journal that no amount of inquiry into physiology and 'reflexes' will reveal a single thing about the human mind".⁴

Enter the Trotskyists

Ilyenkov could not have imagined that the warmest reception for his thought would come initially not from the academic establishment in Europe but from a revolutionary Trotskyist organisation in the UK. The Socialist Labour League's (SLL) leader Gerry Healy had a deep interest in materialist dialectics

dating back to his pre-war years in the British Communist Party. The publication in English of Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* in the early 1960s led to countless discussions on dialectics at educational events and international summer camps.

The organisation's leadership was convinced that a deeper understanding of the contradictory relationship between being and thinking would prove a counterweight to the burden of Positivism and subjectivism that bypassed concrete analysis. Unusually for a left-wing movement in the UK, there was a concentrated emphasis on developing theory as a guide to practice. An education college was established to support this approach.

In 1977 when *Dialectical Logic* first became available in the UK it had a major impact in the SLL's successor organisation, the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP). One member, Terry Button, an engineering technician and trade unionist at Rolls Royce in Coventry, recalls how he was impressed by Ilyenkov's "defining statement about materialism" and the notion of "nature acting upon itself". Ilyenkov had written: "It is in *man* that Nature really performs, in a self-evident way, that very activity that we are accustomed to call 'thinking'".⁵

Shortly after *Logic's* appearance party theoretician and academic Cyril Smith wrote that *Dialectical Logic* "has thrown considerable light on the way Lenin 'read Hegel materialistically'". Smith noted that Ilyenkov was engaged in a philosophical struggle: "Ilyenkov indicates that he is presenting his views on this point in opposition to other – unnamed – writers". He concluded that it "should be studied carefully by everyone fighting to master the revolutionary method".⁶

The WRP's writer on economics, university lecturer Geoff Pilling, took up Ilyenkov's theorisation of the objective nature of

ideality and concepts. Writing about Marx's concept of value in *Capital*, Pilling builds on Ilyenkov's definition of the Ideal:

'Ideality' is a kind of stamp impressed on the substance of nature by social human life activity, a form of the functioning of the physical thing in the process of this activity. So all the things involved in the social process acquire a new 'form of existence' that is not included in their physical nature and differs from it completely – their ideal form.⁷

Pilling also praised Ilyenkov for shedding light on Marx's notion of fetishism.⁸

Controversies over Ilyenkov boil over

Two months later, *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete* received a favourable nine-page review by Anil Bhatti in the New Delhi-based magazine, *Social Scientist*. He saw it as "a necessary corrective to the sterile linguistic manipulations that pass for philosophy in the Anglo-American tradition that still dominates 'intellectual' discourse in India."⁹ In the United States, Marxist physicist Erwin Marquit acknowledged *Dialectical Logic* in his 1981 essay 'Contradictions in Dialectics and Formal Logic'.^{10 11}

The first German editions of *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete* appeared simultaneously in East and West Germany in 1979. These followed translations of Ilyenkov's articles published by the German Democratic Republic's Dietz-Verlag in East Berlin, Pahl-Rugenstein in Cologne and Suhrkamp in Frankfurt. Surprisingly, *Dialectical Logic* has not appeared in

German to this day. Bakhurst explains what was going on in the Soviet Union as Ilyenkov's books reached the West:

...by now the Thaw was over. Under Brezhnev, the political climate had deteriorated significantly, and early in 1976 the [Philosophy] Institute's Scientific Council denounced the manuscript [of *Dialectical Logic*] as revisionist and refused to approve its publication. Ilyenkov's contribution was particularly targeted for criticism. He was much affected by this, and by the generally miserable climate at the Institute, now under the directorship of B.S. Ukraintsev.¹²

The conflicts that ravaged Ilyenkov foreshadowed sharp controversies that arose within the Western revolutionary movement only a few years later. Author Paul Feldman has documented the inter-relation between Ilyenkov's bitter struggles and the conflict within the Trotskyist Fourth International:

... when he [Healy] heard about Ilyenkov's last book, *Leninist Dialectics and the Metaphysics of Positivism*, it was decided that the WRP [Workers Revolutionary Party] itself would have the book translated and published in Britain. The publication by the Trotskyist movement of a book on philosophy by a Soviet academic who worked under Stalinism caused a stir amongst the formal thinkers in the movement. Leaders such as [David] North of the Workers League [in the United States] regarded everything in the Soviet Union as homogenously Stalinist and therefore useless.¹³

North denounced the WRP's New Park publishing house for getting permission to commission an English-language edition of Ilyenkov's *Leninist Dialectics*.¹⁴ Undeterred, Healy reviewed the new translation for *Labour Review* under the headline "An outstanding study of Lenin's dialectics" in February 1983.¹⁵ He recommended it as "most timely" and worthy of the "widest sale and distribution". He flagged up that Ilyenkov's *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital* "has still to appear in the bookshops". In the UK few if any would have known then that the author had ended his own life four years earlier.

The book did, however, soon reach Progress Books' central London outlet in Charing Cross Road. The WRP purchased copies in bulk for party members, along with Ilyenkov's other writings and other Soviet books on philosophy and science. They included philosophical works by V. A. Lektorsky, T. I. Oizerman, M.E. Omelyanovsky, a new *Dictionary of Philosophy* edited by N.T. Frolov (English 1985) as well as I. Laptev on the global ecological crisis.

Healy continued working on the theory of knowledge. He sought to integrate Lenin's materialist reading of Hegel's *Logic* with the 'process and path' as he termed it, of the ascent from the abstract to the concrete. This was in connection with discovering the underlying changes taking place in the realms of politics and revolutionary practice.¹⁶ To assist students, he created a projection of the path of cognition.¹⁷

Notes

1 His paper for that symposium, *From a Marxist-Leninist Point of View*, written for the conference, appeared in English in 1967, but not in the Russian original until 1974. This was one of the earliest articles by Ilyenkov to be published in the English-speaking world.

2 See Maidansky, Krakow 2013; and *Dialectics of the Ideal*, Oittinen and Maidansky 2014

3 *Ideals (Social, Esthetic, Moral), From the Marxist-Leninist Point of View, Mind and Brain (An Answer to D. I. Dubrovskii), The Universal* (Soviet Studies in Philosophy Vol. IV No. 1 1965)

4 Welsh 1977

5 *Dialectical Logic* p.33

6 *Labour Review* 1(10), March 1978

7 Ilyenkov, *The Concept of the Ideal*

8 Pilling, *Marx's Capital, Philosophy and Political Economy* – see also Ilyenkov's influence on Pilling in *Marxist Political Economy*” edited by Doria Pilling 2012

9 Bhatti 1978

10 Marquit, *Science and Society*, Vol.45 No.3 Fall 1981

11 Much later, Graham Priest made supportive references to Ilyenkov's work in *Science & Society*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Winter, 1989/1990), pp. 388-415 <https://philpapers.org/archive/PRIDAD.pdf>

In the next issue, Erwin Marquit wrote 'A Materialist Critique of Hegel's Concept of Identity of Opposites': *Science & Society*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Summer, 1990), pp. 147-166. Here Marquit describes Ilyenkov as “probably the most influential Soviet philosopher to deal with the problem of the relationship between formal and dialectical logic in the post-war period...”. He wrongly takes issue with Ilyenkov, however, setting him against Marx over Ilyenkov's “acceptance of Hegel's concept of the identity of opposites”. (p.164)

12 David Bakhurst (2015) 'Ilyenkov's Passion'. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 22:1, 68-73, DOI: 10.1080/10749039.2014.986580

13 Lotz, Feldman, Gerry Healy, *a Revolutionary Life* p.286

14 The original text was heavily censored by the editors in Moscow,

including a change of title. According to Andrey Maidansky who has compared the published version with Ilyenkov's original:

"The censors did not like Ilyenkov's main idea, namely that Soviet socialism was being constructed in a technocratic way such as Bogdanov's ideal rather than Lenin's humanistic project. Of course, Ilyenkov could not present such subversive views openly. He criticized our 'real' socialism under the guise of criticism against Bogdanov's fantastic novel. Our censors skilfully converted Ilyenkov's burning text into a story about far-away matters, some water under the bridge in praise of great Lenin's book." (Email to author)

15 *Labour Review* Vol. VI No. 8 February 1983

16 'Contradiction, reflection and cognition: three articles on philosophy' July 1986 First printed in the daily *News Line*; then republished in *Marxist Review*, August 1986. <http://www.aworldtowin.net/resources/ContradictionReflectionCognition.html>

17 <http://www.aworldtowin.net/documents/GHProjection.pdf> (2019-02-01)

Philosophical bridge building

In the years following Ilyenkov's suicide in March 1979, the pressure for change continued to build inside the Soviet Union. The contradictory reality of the socio-economic situation, which Ilyenkov believed could be addressed if authorities abandoned their dogmatic viewpoint, was now too acute to be ignored. External pressure by way of a new arms race launched by the Reagan administration helped bring matters to a head.

Signs of a new openness became apparent in the early 1980s when a unique Soviet-American project between scientists, psychologists and educators would lead others concerned with theories of knowledge to Ilyenkov. The VelHam project, as it was called, evolved thanks to a meeting between Yevgeny Velikhov, a top Soviet scientist, and David Hamburg, president of the Carnegie Foundation. Collaboration deepened after Gorbachev came to power in 1985 and Velikhov became his scientific advisor.

Psychologist Seth Chaiklin, then working in New York on computer education with children in an East Harlem housing project, was enlisted as part of the research team:

There was a somewhat large project, funded by the Carnegie Corporation in New York, and organised by Michael Cole, a leading US psychologist who directed

the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, University of California San Diego. Among project participants, it was called VelHam (which referred to the names of Velikhov and Hamburg). Velikhov was the high official in his capacity as Vice President of the Soviet Academy of Sciences.

Hamburg headed the Carnegie Corporation, which was usually oriented to further peace between USSR and USA. In this case, the idea was that scientific cooperation could help matters. And at this time – in the middle 80s – personal computers were just appearing, so there was a project about using them in educational contexts, and there was email communication between USA and USSR. Many highly-placed officials and researchers on the Soviet side from the different academies were involved.¹

American educationalists “wanted to work with top flight psychologists with strong theories of how to organize school instruction from whom we potentially had a lot to learn”, Cole wrote, while there was a particular urgency on the Soviet side:

He [Velikhov] certainly wanted a positive symbolic outcome, but for him the need to do something substantial about computers and education was a pressing social responsibility. He had a country falling down around his ears and he needed a lot of resources for computerization fast, whether he liked the regime within which he worked or not.²

Chaiklin explains the particular value of Ilyenkov's contribution:

He is part of an epistemological approach – so for me it is not so much to ‘use’ Ilyenkov, but to use his texts as a kind of stepladder to understand this way of thinking. For my part, right now, working with physics teaching, Ilyenkov's definition of ‘thinking’ as ‘appropriate/intelligent action with an object’ has been useful. Or the idea of ‘ideal’ is something that becomes a part of the ‘toolkit’ of thinking – so in my work on a theoretical model of professional practice, I use the ideal concept. In other words, it is not a matter of being an Ilyenkov scholar or pursuing questions or problems defined by Ilyenkov – but of participating in the intellectual way of thinking and using what concepts and ideas might be relevant. But this might change soon – in that I have started to consider writing an introduction to this epistemological tradition for psychological and educational researchers, and then of course I will have to engage more substantially with *Dialectical Logic*, etc.³

Ilyenkov and Scandinavian psychology

In practical terms, Ilyenkov's greatest impact has been on the field of educational research and his work found a remarkable resonance in the work of Danish psychologists. Professor Emerita in developmental psychology Mariane Hedegaard recalls discovering a mutual interest with Finnish cultural historical activity theorist Yrjö Engeström.

She went on to make a major contribution in the field of developmental psychology and the cultural-historical approach to learning, teaching at the Universities of Aarhus and Copenhagen. Seth Chaiklin writes:

Mariane completed her doctoral degree in 1977 and while working on concept learning felt a growing need to understand it in terms of action. She was probably invited by Yrjö to Helsinki in 1980, where she met the Russian psychologist Vasily Davydov, and learned about Ilyenkov. Davydov introduced her to the notion of concepts in terms of rising from abstract to concrete, and the need to understand the concrete in its complexity and not in terms of empirical abstractions.

This was of course an idea from Ilyenkov, but Hedegaard encountered it through Davydov. This led to a break-through in terms of how to continue her work with concept learning.

Studying *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital* helped her develop the way in which practice is the basis for knowledge, rather than mental processes. Both of these ideas were developed further in her work on children's development and school teaching (focused on history of development of society, and development of species).

Morten Nissen, psychologist and professor at the Danish School of Education at Aarhus University, takes up his side of the story:

It was sometime in the mid-1980s that I learned of Ilyenkov through networks of cultural-historical / Vygotskian researchers who drew on Vasily Davydov in educational research (including Seth). Klaus Holzkamp, championed the Vygotskian version of Critical Psychology. Both groups were quite strong at the time in (West) Germany and Denmark, and I belonged to both. Both sources referred to Ilyenkov as a theorist of dialectics.

While working as a student assistant for a Davydovian group at the Institute of Educational Research around 1986, I bought the English translation of *Dialectical Logic* in the small bookshop of the Association for Friendship between Denmark and the Soviet Union in 1984. I recall that it cost 25 DKK, which was very cheap. It was small with thin paper pages, almost like a psalm book. I remember reading the last part of the book on the ferry from Stockholm to Helsinki on the way to the International Congress for Research on Activity Theory conference in Lahti, Finland in 1990.

So Ilyenkov taught me an epistemology of practice even before I learned much more from Uffe Juul Jensen, the philosopher who was head of my research group. In general, back then we read more in German than in English, when it came to Marxist philosophy and psychology. Not only Marx and Engels. For instance, we would read Leontyev and V.V. Davydov in German translations. Vygotsky was translated into Danish.

Nissen explains how Ilyenkov's form of creative Marxism connected with practice came as a breath of fresh air:

Even before glasnost and perestroika, we were quite an important part of the communist intellectuals who wanted to move beyond the stale diamat orthodoxy. There was a lot more interesting theoretical debate going on in Marxism in Western Europe than in the East. Suddenly here was someone from Russia who could contribute in interesting ways. This was meaningful due to Ilyenkov's reading of dialectics, not as a set of reflections on language (the nominalist reading), and also not as a set of 'laws' about nature or society (the realist reading), but as a reflection on practice / praxis. We had real hopes for glasnost / perestroika – we did not expect the total collapse.

In 1986 the first ISCRAT conference was held in West Berlin. Davydov was supposed to have come, but he cancelled last minute. We heard that he was somehow no longer tolerated in the Brezhnev administration. That made him even more of a hero; he kind of represented the Thaw period of the 1960s.

Developmental psychologist Dr Signe Juhl-Nørgaard believes that Ilyenkov's struggle with his contemporaries can to some degree be read into today's power struggles taking place in academia. There is a strong tendency to favour a natural scientific/physiological approach towards psychology.

In *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital* Ilyenkov wrote:

A living rabbit may be analytically decomposed into chemical elements, into mechanical ‘particles’, etc. But, having thus obtained an aggregate of analytically singled-out elements, we shall not be able to perform a reverse operation, even after a most detailed consideration of these elements – we shall never understand why their combination before the analytical dismemberment existed as a live rabbit. ⁴

“The ‘rabbit’ allegory preoccupied psychologists’ minds during the 1970s, before the cognitive revolution of the 1980s became dominant in research. Instead of dissecting the rabbit they sought to create a psychology studying human relations and development as part of a whole”, Juhl-Nørgaard says. ⁵

Within education, learning was approached as exploration and not something you can simply ‘transfer’ (herein lies the Nordic pedagogical approach to some degree still used in schools today).

Within the same period two new universities were founded in Denmark: Roskilde University in 1972 and Aalborg University in 1974. Here the basic idea was a flat, non-hierarchical structure with students leading projects and the teachers and students running the university with a democratic approach. Juhl-Nørgaard recalls:

I completed my degree in the ‘free college’ which was a direct-democratic institution. From there I continued at Aalborg university, which was known as a friendly environment for people from

less academic family backgrounds, which is why it seemed a sustainable choice.

Participating in problem-based group work at Aalborg University, a wholeness approach to pedagogy had still survived for some subjects. But there was no real striving for theoretical depth. Philosophy and theory of knowledge were reduced to a very basic introductory book and the cognitive and neurological approaches were seen as 'real' science. So when I was encouraged to do research (by one of Seth Chaiklin's PhD students) I was enlisted in the cognitive and neurological approach to developmental psychology.

It came as a great provocative shock for me, later arriving at the department of psychology at Copenhagen University back in 2010, when I, as the last person, got an open PhD position. Here I joined an environment where many people had worked with the theoretical foundation of the educational approaches of which I had been a part. I cannot remember when I first came across Ilyenkov, but Davydov came up frequently in my supervisor's (Mariane Hedegaard) writings while finding my feet in this research group. It was probably while attending a research meeting or discussing with my supervisor.

It appeared that a number of psychology departments were being closed down, leading to staff changeovers and departures. She discovered that psychology had joined the medical faculty when she began work at Helsinki University in 2018.

So here the story has come full circle, with considerable pressure in today's neoliberal-dominated education against

a wholeness approach to psychology. However, pedagogical practices still appear to live and thrive at Roskilde University. Cultural-historical and critical approaches to theory and practice research in academia, will, Juhl-Nørgaard believes, eventually rejoin the search for the rabbit.

Notes

- 1 Email to the author. The Carnegie Reporter <https://medium.com/carnegie-reporter/war-games-29fe413f1818>
- 2 An Experiment in Computer-Mediated Cooperation Between Nations in Conflict (1994) <http://lchc.ucsd.edu/Histarch/velham.html>
- 3 Email to author
- 4 Ilyenkov, Chapter 5 *Dialectics of the Abstract and Concrete in Marx's Capital*
- 5 Interview with author, March 2019

Finland takes centre stage

Long before the VelHam project brought Americans into deeper contact with Soviet psychology, a Finnish student was browsing in a left-wing bookshop in Helsinki. It was around 1975. In the Soviet section he chanced upon a book by Ilyenkov.

Vesa Oittinen, who went on to become a professor at Helsinki University's Aleksanteri Institute, the Finnish Centre for Russian and East European Studies, recalls that he felt that "in some strange way the book was exceptional". He goes on to explain:

When I detected Ilyenkov's *Dialekticheskaia Logika* among new Russian books back in 1975 I felt that most Soviet literature on philosophy sold at Kansankulttuuri (People's Culture) shop was rather dull Marxism-Leninism. But this book seemed different, so I bought it. I felt that the book was important, although I then could not yet explain why. With the help of a dictionary I managed to read it, but I must confess that I did not understand that much. I do recall wondering why Ilyenkov so stubbornly insisted on the unity – yes, the identity – of dialectics, logics and theory of cognition. I of course had not yet got wind of the intense debates of some Soviet philosophers on this theme.

So exceptional was the book, in fact, that Oittinen persevered until he mastered its content sufficiently to write an article based on Ilyenkov's interpretation of Spinoza which had especially impressed him.

In 1977 as the 300th centenary of Spinoza's death approached, he discovered that the philosopher's jubilee year would pass unnoted in Finland. He therefore submitted the article to *Tiede ja edistys* (Science and Progress). It was one of the first to engage with Ilyenkov's ideas. Oittinen continues:

It was futile to believe that analytical philosophers would even for a moment leave their language-games and note the existence of a great thinker. So I wrote an article with the title 'Spinozan ajankohaisuudesta' (On the Actuality of Spinoza) and got it published in *Tiede ja Edistys*, the journal of the Finnish Association of Researchers, which was then a strictly Marxist organisation. The article was written fully in the spirit of Ilyenkov, although I only quoted him a couple of times.

I sent a copy of the journal to Ilyenkov himself, and attached a short letter written in German. I did not get any reply – actually, I did not even expect it, since I had sent the article only for information, fully aware that Ilyenkov could not read my Finnish text. In 2018, Andrey Maidansky, who is editing the materials for Ilyenkov's collected works, told me that he had found my copy of *Tiede ja Edistys* in Ilyenkov's archives and sent me a scan of it. The accompanying letter was not found, but at least I now know that my mail actually reached Ilyenkov. Now, over 40 years later, I understand

that already at that time he must have been severely depressed and had other matters to worry about than write letters to some student from Finland.

Today, I feel a bit embarrassed by its juvenile zeal, especially as I have now grown more critical of Ilyenkov, who in my view interprets Spinoza too much in the spirit of his own philosophy of activity.¹

Before discovering *Dialectical Logic*, during the mid-1970s, Oittinen had been active in the Socialist Students' Union (SOL), which had a section for philosophy. The SOL had contacts with Soviet youth organisations and an opportunity to request a lecturer on philosophy from the Soviet Union emerged. He proposed at a cell meeting that Ilyenkov should be invited to Helsinki, and the others agreed. The proposal was then sent to the Komsomol, which was in charge of the exchange of lecturers. But in Moscow they decided otherwise.

After some time, we got the reply that they would send a philosopher to give some lectures – but instead of Ilyenkov, another philosopher arrived – a certain Tiukhtin. It seems, as one of my friends suspected, that the SOL proposal was forwarded further to the USSR Academy of Sciences, where the director of the Institute of Philosophy, Ukraintsev, of course did not want to let Ilyenkov go abroad.

Oittinen continues:

Well, Tiukhtin performed quite decently, having his two, three lectures in Helsinki and some other places

in Finland. It proved that he was especially fond of cybernetics, an area of inquiry which Ilyenkov was especially critical of. In a concluding banquet where Tiukhtin replied to questions from the Finnish students, I asked him of his opinion of Ilyenkov. It was strange to see, how the hitherto friendly expression of Tiukhtin's face changed into a contemptuous one: 'Such a speculative thinker!' It became clear that Soviet philosophers did not form any peaceful consortium, despite their shared Marxist ideology.

Oittinen went on to play a pivotal role in introducing Ilyenkov's thinking to a new audience. The international conference he organised in Helsinki in 1999 sparked a period of fresh research and assessment of Ilyenkov's approach.

He explains why Ilyenkov attracted him all those years ago:

When I began to study philosophy at the University of Helsinki, the Institute of Philosophy was a fortress of analytic Anglo-Saxon philosophy, in an almost literal sense. The study of other philosophical currents, such as phenomenology, was actively discouraged, not to speak of Marxism. The straight-laced Positivist atmosphere of the Institute was a disappointment for me, although of course internationally renowned philosophers, such as the eminent logician Jaakko Hintikka and Georg Henrik von Wright did work there. Later I developed a very good relationship with von Wright and I translated his book *Varieties of Goodness* into Finnish. But I nevertheless found the atmosphere of the Institute of Philosophy desolate.

So it was only logical, Oittinen recalls, that he was drawn to Soviet philosophy as a possible alternative to the dictatorship of the Finnish Positivists.

Some years later, Finnish psychologists of the activity approach school (particularly inspired by Yrjö Engeström) discovered Ilyenkov as the ‘court philosopher’ of Aleksei Leontyev and other psychologists of the Soviet cultural-historical school. Together with Airi Leppänen, Engeström translated Ilyenkov’s 1977 article ‘Stanovlenie lichnosti’ (The Formation of the Personality) into Finnish.

In this article, Ilyenkov assessed the results of the famous Zagorsk experiment with sensory impaired children. This translation was published in 1981 in the journal *Tiede ja edistys*, and Oittinen co-wrote a short foreword along with Juha Manninen, professor of the history of ideas.

When David Bakhurst’s seminal book on Ilyenkov and Soviet philosophy was published in 1991, Oittinen read it with great interest. But otherwise he did not study Ilyenkov until he was appointed to the Aleksanteri Institute in 1999. The Institute had been founded a couple of years earlier in order to boost research on Russia and Eastern Europe. He decided to hold an international symposium on Ilyenkov sponsored by the new institute.

The response far exceeded his expectations. Many scholars attended, including Alexei Novokhatko (Ilyenkov’s archivist and biographer), David Bakhurst, Evert van der Zweerde, Feliks Mikhailov and Janette Friedrich. The results were brought together in *Evald Ilyenkov’s Philosophy Revisited* published by the Aleksanteri Institute in 2000.² Although he now feels that the book is rather eclectic and of its time – Ilyenkov is compared with Mamardashvili, Foucault and

other authors then in vogue – he says that the “eclectic” option was deliberate:

The atmosphere in the 1990s was, after the breakdown of the so-called real socialism, such that I felt the need to demonstrate that not everything in the heritage of the Soviet philosophy belonged in the dustbin of history. Despite its faults, after Bakhurst’s book, *Evald Ilyenkov’s Philosophy Revisited* was the first publication in the West dealing with Ilyenkov’s contribution. I hope it is not an exaggeration to say that Ilyenkov’s international career gained momentum as a result. True, there have been previous attempts to raise Ilyenkov’s profile outside the Soviet Union, most notably the Italian translation of *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx’s Capital*, but they did not meet with great success. It seems to me that only the demise of the Soviet Union created a more favourable atmosphere for the reception of perhaps the most interesting Soviet philosopher!

Note

- 1 Email to author from Vesa Oittinen
- 2 Oittinen 2000

Perestroika, glasnost and beyond

As the VelHam project demonstrated, Ilyenkov's philosophical battles foreshadowed dramatic changes that were to come in the Soviet Union. For a section of the bureaucracy, it was clear that the country could not go on the way it had. Reality forced its way to the top of the political agenda in the shape of the election in 1985 of Mikhail Gorbachev as secretary of the CPSU.

As glasnost reached its peak in 1989-1990, there was a feverish flurry of exchanges and contacts as archives were prised open and long-hidden books, stories and experiences emerged into the spotlight. Novosti, the state publishing house, suddenly produced briefings and pamphlets that amazed Western readers, accustomed to pro-regime propaganda.

One of them was a tiny pamphlet *Dialectics is the Soul of Marxism*. Its anonymous author made a rousing appeal for "the new political thinking" to adopt a dialectical materialist and internationalist approach to the urgent problems of the approaching third millennium, in particular ecological crisis and nuclear war. The approachable style and singling out of categories of cognition were redolent of Ilyenkov.

In September 1991, a few weeks after the August 19 coup against Gorbachev, a group of UK Marxists – Corinna Lotz, Paul Feldman and Gerry Gold – travelled to Moscow. They met Anatoly Pavlovich Butenko at the Institute of the Economics

of the Socialist System. Butenko was a stern critic of what he termed the “Stalin version of history”, insisting that the Soviet Union had not been a socialist state. He had been a class-mate and friend of Ilyenkov at Moscow University. He described the circumstances surrounding Ilyenkov’s death.¹

In 1992 the group again visited Russia to explore philosophical and political openings, motivated by the belief that even though the Soviet Union was no longer, continuity with the creative, revolutionary essence of materialistic dialectics could be re-ignited. They met with friends and acquaintances of Ilyenkov in Moscow, including *Pravda* columnist, Boris S. Slavin, political journalist Alexander Frolov and Ilyenkov scholar Sergei Mareyev.

Frolov said he had written about Ilyenkov (*Communist* June 1989) and was in touch with the Ilyenkovist school in Alma Ata (today’s Almaty), Kazakhstan. Mareyev had just written an article, ‘A few words about Ilyenkov’, for the Moscow State University Journal’s *Pages from History* series. On return, the British group commissioned a translation and published it in *Socialist Future*. It was one of the first articles about Ilyenkov to appear on the Internet.²

David Bakhurst’s brilliant *Consciousness and Revolution in Soviet Philosophy from the Bolsheviks to Evald Ilyenkov* (1991) proved a game changer in global awareness of Ilyenkov’s role. The rest, one could say, is history. But perhaps not.

Paraguayan-British researcher Ricardo Medina was amongst the first to grasp its significance, reviewing it in the pages of *Soviet Weekly*, just three months before the dissolution of the USSR (26 September 1991). Robin Aizlewood at London’s School of Slavonic and East European Studies, reviewing Bakhurst’s book for *The Higher* (7 February 1992), considered that a “new chapter

in Russian philosophy” could be opening up. More discussions of the book included one by activity theorist Peter Jones.³

His observation that “current ideological trends within the former USSR, characterised by a stampede away from Marxism, do not augur well for an objective examination of Ilyenkov and others like him” was certainly true at that time. But he could not reckon with the fidelity of Ilyenkov’s daughter Elena Illesh, his friends and followers, driven by the materiality and power of his thought.

Despite the German Democratic Republic ultra-Stalinist leadership’s disapproval of Gorbachev’s *perestroika* and *glasnost*, the ‘Ilyenkov effect’ had penetrated into the GDR’s Academy of Sciences. In June 1986, the *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* reviewed Gudrun Richter’s *The Dialectics of the Logical and the Historical*.⁴ She was one of the few women contributors ever to appear in its pages.

Richter had been a student of Ilyenkov. Her book (published by Dietz Verlag, Berlin 1985) built on her mentor’s work on the dialectics of the logical and the historical in 1960⁵ and again in 1971.⁶ Her thoughts had a prophetic resonance, given the “logic of history” that saw the meltdown of the GDR in 1989.

In 1994 Richter selected, translated and introduced a book of essays by Ilyenkov as part of *Fortschritte der Psychologie* series, published by LIT in the now reunited Germany. It is possibly one of the few books of its kind in the German language. In her introduction she recalls encountering Ilyenkov during her time at the Moscow Institute of Philosophy in 1971:

At that time I knew little about him or his philosophical views; but I felt that his colleagues (and not only those

who shared his views) held this fragile-looking person of slight stature in special esteem.⁷

Richter noted that “Ilyenkov’s work played no role in the GDR’s official philosophy with the exception of his chapters in the *History of Marxist Dialectics*. This book is by way of a belated amends”.⁸ She uses the word ‘Wiedergutmachung’ which is the term often used to designate German government compensation to Holocaust victims. In 2006 the German Communist Party (DKP)’s *Marxistische Blaetter* magazine published her translation of Ilyenkov’s anguished 1967 letter to the Central Committee. (see page 9)

Into the 21st century

Under the guidance of Cultural Historical Activity theorist Andrew Blunden, the Marxist Internet Archive has been steadily publishing Ilyenkov’s writings making them freely available to a global public. In 2009 Blunden edited a selection of essays by Ilyenkov *The Ideal in Human Activity*.⁹

Russian scholar Maidansky maintains an invaluable multi-lingual Ilyenkov internet archive with original texts and new material as it appears.¹⁰ He has provided insights into Ilyenkov’s elaboration of the Ideal and Russian-European philosophical cross-pollination. Together with Ilyenkov’s daughter Elena Illesh, Maidansky is presently co-editing Ilyenkov’s collected works.

Between 2007 and 2017 *The Journal of Russian and East European Studies* featured a wealth of material by Ilyenkov, hitherto unpublished in English, on education, thought, biology and psychology.

In 2012 Oittinen held a symposium entitled *Spinoza in Soviet Thought*. It was sponsored by three institutions at Helsinki University and brought together philosophers, activity theorists, psychologists and contemporary political campaigners from many countries. There, a group of post-graduate students at Helsinki University's Center for Research on Activity, Development and Learning (CRADLE) joined with UK political-Ilyenkovists to form the International Friends of Ilyenkov (IFI) group.¹¹ The initiative received Oittinen's blessing and has attracted members around the world via its Facebook page and website. The IFI holds regular online discussions on Ilyenkov's writings, shares new research into contemporary problems and maintains a Facebook group. It organised a symposium on the theme of Deconstructing Neoliberal Hegemony in Copenhagen in June 2018.¹² Members and supporters of IFI came from around the world to share ideas with lecturers and students at a joint seminar at Copenhagen University's Department of Psychology.

In October, Marie Curie fellow at Wolverhampton University Ketii Chukhrov organised a symposium at Westminster University focusing on *Soviet Cosmologies and Ontologies*, highlighting Ilyenkov's continuing relevance. In 2019 an online IFI webinar heard presentations about the relevance of Ilyenkov's Ideal and the dialectics of Brexit.¹³

Thus in recent years the face of Ilyenkov studies has changed unrecognisably. New material is constantly emerging. Alex Levant's sympathetic rendering into English of the unexpurgated version of *Dialectics of the Ideal* has made Ilyenkov's thoughts come to life. 2018 saw the appearance of Giuliano Vivaldi's translation of *Cosmology of the Soul* and a documentary film by Alexander Rozhkov. A major overview of Russian philosophical thought contains the original April 1954 'Theses'

which led to Ilyenkov and Valentin Korovikov's expulsion from Moscow University.

Ilyenkov's life is testament to his battle to reverse the damage done to Marxism and the philosophy of materialist dialectics during the long period of Stalinist, bureaucratic rule. His exploration of how we arrive at knowledge is based on a truly human, active and social approach to a whole range of disciplines, from economics to pedagogy and politics.

The recovery of Ilyenkov's contribution should not only be an act of reparation or tribute to his individual genius, great as he was. It can and must be the unquiet Ideal that is the impulse for the development of theories and practices to meet the big challenges arising from today's social, ecological and political crises.

Notes

1 From the author's Moscow Diary 14-21 September 1991:

"Butenko had been a close colleague but not a close friend. They had been at university together. In the days before Ilyenkov's suicide Ilyenkov had led a struggle against the re-nomination of the reactionary Stalinist director of the Institute of Philosophy, B. S. Ukraintsev [director between 1974-1983]. Ilyenkov had been under fire for some time. A KGB woman agent in the institute attacked him for writing an article in an Austrian journal, accusing him of being in the pay of imperialism. Ilyenkov had actually written the article at the insistence of the Central Committee. At the meeting where the vote was to be taken on whether to reappoint Ukraintsev, Ilyenkov confided to Butenko that he could not go on living in this way, and that the director would smash up the work of the institute. Ilyenkov took his coat and left the meeting. The next day Ukraintsev was reconfirmed in his post and Ilyenkov committed suicide. Butenko also recounted how as a young lecturer Ilyenkov, and another philosopher, Alexander Zinoviev, had turned the institute's wall newspaper into a satirical weapon to attack the dogmatists and Stalinists. Ilyenkov and Zinoviev represented two leading but different trends in Soviet

philosophy – the socio-philosophical and the natural scientific trend, and had fierce arguments. Butenko tried to reconcile them. He himself had voted against the ostracism of Ilyenkov. The wall newspaper was closed by a special decision of Moscow Party Committee. The institute's collective opposed this because it was the official institute paper.”

2 Socialist Future Summer 1996 Vol. 5 No. 1 A philosopher under suspicion <http://aworldtowin.net/resources/Ilyenkov.html>

3 Jones 1994

4 The Law-governed and the Historical Process – review by Bernd Edelhoff and Manfred Wockenfuss (author's archive)

5 *Logical and historical: Questions of dialectical materialism. Elements of dialectics*. Moscow, 1960, p. 310-343 – see <http://caute.tk/ilyenkov/texts/loghi.html> (only in Russian)

6 *Logical and historical: The history of the Marxist dialectic. From the rise of Marxism to the Leninist stage*. Moscow, 1971, p. 265-288 – see <http://caute.tk/ilyenkov/texts/loghis.html> (only in Russian)

7 Richter, Ewald Wasiljewitsch Iljenkow: *Dialektik des Ideellen*

8 German original – In der offiziellen Philosophie der DDR spielten Iljenkows Arbeiten keine Rolle – mit Ausnahme der beiden von ihm verfassten Kapitel in der „Geschichte der marxistischen Dialektik“. Deshalb ist der von mir publizierte Auswahlband auch eine Art später „Wiedergutmachung“.

9 Ilyenkov *The Ideal in Human Activity* (2009)

10 <http://caute.ru/ilyenkov/index.html>

11 International Friends of Ilyenkov
<https://internationalfriendsofilyenkov.wordpress.com/>

12 IFI2018 Copenhagen <https://internationalfriendsofilyenkov.wordpress.com/deconstructing-neoliberal-hegemony-symposium-copenhagen-2018/>

13 Cole, Penny, *Brexit and the Ideal* <https://internationalfriendsofilyenkov.wordpress.com/2019/02/01/brexit-and-the-ideal/>

Feldman, Paul, *What's the Ideal got to do with Brexit?*
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International Friends of Ilyenkov

The IFI is a group of international scholars, researchers and activists who are reading and exploring the work of defiant Soviet philosopher Evald Ilyenkov to help shed light on today's cultural, philosophical, educational and political challenges.

Whether you are already familiar with Ilyenkov, or encountering his work for the first time, you are welcome to join us in exploring its significance for the 21st century.

The IFI holds regular online webinars to share research projects. If you wish to participate, please register your interest via the website or Facebook group. Suggestions for face-to-face conferences and symposia are most welcome.

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