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## ИСТОРИЯ ФИЛОСОФИИ КАК ОСНОВАНИЕ СОВЕТСКОГО КАНОНА: ПЕРВЫЙ ЛЕКЦИОННЫЙ КУРС ПО ДИАЛЕКТИЧЕСКОМУ МАТЕРИАЛИЗМУ В БЕЛАРУСИ В 1920-х гг.

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Реконструируется структура, понятийный аппарат и аргументация первого советского учебного курса по диалектическому материализму, опубликованного в 1920-х гг. в Минске профессором С. Я. Вольфсоном. Показана гетерогенность содержания курса, сочетающего в себе элементы различных философских, научных и идеологических дискурсов. Обоснована значимость историко-философской части для формирования раннесоветского философского канона.

**Ключевые слова:** С. Я. Вольфсон; диалектический материализм; советская философия; советский философский канон; история философии; трансфер знания.

## HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY AS FOUNDATION FOR THE SOVIET CANON: THE FIRST LECTURE COURSE IN DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM IN BELARUS IN THE 1920s

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The research reconstructs structure, concepts and argumentation of the first Soviet course in dialectical materialism taught and published in the 1920s in Minsk by professor S. Y. Wolfson. The analysis explicates that the course is rather heterogeneous and combines elements of different philosophical, scientific, ideological discourses. The importance of the parts in history of philosophy for the development of early Soviet philosophical canon is proved.

**Key words:** S. Wolfson; dialectical materialism; Soviet philosophy; Soviet philosophical canon; history of philosophy; knowledge transfer.

### Introduction

So called dialectical materialism was an important part of the Soviet official philosophy. It is usually criticized for its explicitly ideological character and as a rule is attributed to the Soviet period in history. The post-Soviet period in development of the post-Soviet philosophical traditions (in Russian Federation, Belarus, the Ukraine and others) is usually interpreted as

overcoming of or at least dissociation from the Soviet philosophy in its most explicit and blamed as biased forms [1]. At the same time one could suppose that the Soviet philosophy as an intellectual and cultural phenomenon is not strictly connected to the Soviet period and does not disappear after the collapse of the Soviet Union. We could suppose that as a special form of in-

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tellectual activity with its own certain style of thinking, vision of a rationality, rules of argumentation the Soviet philosophy still exists and influence the post-Soviet philosophical tradition greatly at least in inexplicit forms. A number of rather active discussions [2; 3] about the Soviet philosophy could be interpreted as an

argument for its urgent character and continuation of its influence. Therefore thoughtful and comprehensive research of the Soviet philosophy as an intellectual phenomenon without explicit prejudices for or against it could be useful for better understanding of contemporary post-Soviet philosophical and intellectual life.

### Main part

The period of 1920s is of a special importance for the history of the Soviet philosophy as a period of a formation of a tradition as such. In the paper we will analyze the first Soviet textbook on Dialectical materialism. The textbook is based on a course of lectures read at the department of social sciences of Belarusian State University by Semen Yakovlevich Wolfson (1894–1941), and later it was recommended for educational institutions of the whole Soviet Union. A few words should be said to introduce our main character. He studied philosophy at Kiev University, since the 1921 worked at Belarusian State University as a professor, in 1928 became an academic of Belarusian academy of science. The course was firstly published in the 1922 and till the 1929 was republished seven times (circulation of each of the editions is 5000 except the last one with circulation in 3000 copies).

One of the most important and interesting peculiarities of the Soviet philosophical tradition in the 1920s is the fact that it was developed not only and even mostly not for philosophical or scientific purposes. The main purposes, stated explicitly as a rule, were polemical and educational ones. These strict connections to the ideological discussions with their polemical style and to educational practices oriented toward wide and often non-professional audience are very important for adequate understanding of the Soviet philosophical tradition as such.

The concept of a canon is usually attributed to scholar, scholastic (in neutral meaning of the term) philosophy which is presented as a course for students [4]. The peculiarity of the period that it is a period of canon's formation and content and structure of the courses is not very similar to its late, 'classical' examples. On the contrary, the courses are rather heterogeneous and combine elements of different philosophical, scientific, ideological discourses. One could mention that the situation could be compared to the post-Soviet with its quick and rather spontaneous changes in existing (the Soviet) philosophical canon and appearance of new knowledge (situation of active transfer of knowledge, conceptions and ideas, mainly the Western ones) new disciplines (such as cultural or religious studies) and approaches.

The purpose of the creators of the first courses in a new the Soviet philosophy (and Wolfson personally) was not a trivial or at least easy one. They should

prepare a compact and well-understood material for unprepared philosophically (and not well-educated or educated at all as a rule) audience. The courses should reflect Marxist vision of philosophy and ideology which themselves were not stable and were in the process of its formation. Wolfson understands all the difficulties with epistemic and social status of dialectical materialism well (he names it «parvenu climbing to the top of the University cathedra»<sup>1</sup> [5, p. 7] in the text).

A peculiarity of the period is absence of clear division and separation between two main parts of the Soviet official philosophy, which are dialectical materialism and historical materialism. Wolfson himself writes that his course is often called Marxist sociology (the early name for courses in Historical materialism) but Dialectical materialism is more appropriate and adequate for it despite the fact that the course combined elements of them both. He writes: «My course is presented in University plans as "Historical materialism". I prefer to this title which not very exact the one that is more adequate to the course – dialectical materialism» [5, p. 1]. At the same time he insisted on the priority of dialectical materialism as more general discipline: «Therefore Historical materialism is a narrower concept than dialectical materialism. Only after acquisition of the main statements of dialectical materialism it is possible to apply the statements to social sphere i. e. to substantiate the materialism historically» [5, p. 11]. Dialectical materialism, as Wolfson states, presents materialistic understanding of nature while the historical materialism – materialistic understanding of history correspondently.

We should mention that there are essential differences between different editions of the courses. While the first edition (published in 1922) contains only two parts of the course (which contains three main parts in reality), the later editions contain new parts and appendixes. One could suppose that the tendency of separation of materials on dialectical materialism from materials on historical materialism would prevail but in the texts it is not so. The later editions of the course, on the contrary, contain more and more materials which could be attributed to the course in Marxist sociology (the state, family, classes etc.). At the same time the themes are very similar to the themes of standard philosophical courses, for example, Hegel's ones [6]. One could conclude that the difference between the

<sup>1</sup>Hereinafter translated by A. D.

courses at least till the end of the 1920s was not clear and it was based more on preferences of the lecturers themselves than on some scientific criteria (such as its object or methodology).

The later editions of the course contain forewords (to each of the new editions). Despite short information about the main didactic purposes of the text each of the forewords contain a polemical part in which the author stands upon his vision and answers to the critique of his opponents (in detail as a rule). The answer is usually presented according to some standard scheme. The objection to some statement of the text of the course or to some elements of Wolfson's approach as such or is presented (it is attributed to a certain person as a rule) with its critical analysis and an answer in an expanded form. At the same time the content of the course as such has much less polemical character and in fact the forewords are the most polemical part of the text.

One of the most interesting answers of Wolfson to his critics deals with the problem of philosophical terminology used in the course and in more general form the problem of terminology of Dialectical materialism as such. Despite the critique of his opponent (presented as «comrade Gorev») Wolfson insists on usefulness and even necessity of the usage of Hegelian terminology (the discussion concerns the concept of *negation of negation*). Wolfson argues that the concept has not a metaphor but also a scientific meaning and is not a speculative one. He refers to the opinions of F. Engels and G. Plekhanov on the matter of *negation of negation* and concludes that it is «one of the most essential and *revolutionary* moments of Marxist's dialectic which is applicable not only to *ideas* but to *things* also» [5, p. IV].

The style of the text is not very scientific-like. Equally with philosophical argumentation with special terminology the text contains a significant number of references to works of art (mainly poetical – W. Shakespeare, A. Pushkin, N. Nekrasov, H. Heine) with extended quotations from them. Wolfson himself interpreted his work as a popular one and interpreted the popularity in a positive meaning while arguing with his critics. At the same time he insisted that such a short preparative course inevitably will be schematic. It is important to mention that a significant part of the polemics between Wolfson and his opponents deals with a mere questions of history of philosophy, mostly his interpretation in the text of philosophy of Aristotle, Descartes, Gassendi and others.

The course as such (in its first edition especially) contains a lot of information in history of philosophy while the exposition of the main statements of dialectical materialism is rather poor. And while the later editions contain chapters on such issues as the state, classes, family, fine art, the first one contain a large part in history of development of materialist and dialectical ideas and a much shorter part concerning

dialectical materialism as such. At the same time one could suppose that the chapters contain mere Marxist or materialist as such vision of the problems while their relation to dialectical materialism especially could be questioned. At least these parts of Wolfson's course in dialectical materialism are rather similar to the courses in Marxist sociology (later – historical materialism) by Katzenbogen [7]. In fact one could suppose that the text of the lectures presented in the first edition could be called «history of dialectical materialism» with at least not less serious reasons than for its real name of «Dialectical materialism». The structure of the first edition of the course contains a part in history of materialism and a part on Marxist philosophy (both without special names). The parts are almost equal in their size (79 and 77 pages correspondingly). At the same time the second part also contains materials on history of philosophy (describing history of Marxist philosophy and analyzing its relation to other systems of philosophy, mainly the Hegelian one). As one could notice the Marxist doctrine as such (including both historical and theoretical parts) is presented in a relatively small part while the part representing the history of philosophy (materialistic and dialectical mainly but not only) dominates.

History of philosophy is presented in a form of a number of long periods (Antiquity, the Middle Ages etc.) replacing and developing each other consistently. The main driving force of the development is a contest between materialism and idealism (the period of Middle Ages, for example, is presented as a «century of old antimaterialistic reaction» [5, p. 23]). Materialistic explanation of philosophical ideas through the social conditions is presented rather schematically and do not prevail over the description and analysis of the ideas themselves.

The percent of pages presented for the part in history of philosophy decreases during the enlargement of the text, but its significance, on the contrary, increases greatly. In the preface to the third edition of the course Wolfson writes that the part in history of philosophy «is of a special difficulty because to analyze development of materialist world view means to cover development of philosophy as such» [5, p. 7]. He insists that his research in history of philosophy is limited and incomplete and determined by his interest to the materialist approach. In the preface to the 4<sup>th</sup> edition he already emphasizes the importance of the history of philosophy and argues with his critic (V. Vaganyan) who blames it for a scholastic character. Wolfson writes that «it is useless to dive into polemical literature, to study classics without clear historical perspective. To present necessary historical perspective for unprepared reader was my first task» [8, p. IV]. And then he quotes positive reviews of his book, emphasizing its historical character: «There is only one of Marxist books presenting main materialists in Russian. There are many books in history of

philosophy and from the worth reading Wolfson's is the most popular one» [8, p. IV] (by comrade Tarabyanov).

It is interesting to analyze the list of literature and authors to which Wolfson refers in his text. Besides standard Marxist authorities (including K. Marx, F. Engels, V. Lenin, G. Plekhanov, A. Deborin) the list of literature includes a large number of works merely in history of philosophy (the German ones mainly). Wolfson refers to such famous historian of philosophy as K. Fischer and F. Lange. The first part concerning history of materialism structurally is very similar to Lange's «History of materialism» which contains more than 1000 pages and is one of the most fundamental and well known works in the area of research of materialist philosophy [9]. It is very symbolical that the beginning of his text Wolfson starts with a reference to Lange's work.

We should notice that a history of philosophy as a discipline and a system of knowledge played an extremely significant role in the German philosophy of the XIX–XX centuries, and first of all in educational system. It is important to mention that contemporary researches in History of German philosophy of the XIX century (and of German idealism especially) presents it as a various phenomena defined by a number of factors and a set of relations. The concept of *constellations* is used for description of this variety. The researcher's interest is focused not only on the mostly known figures (such as Kant or Hegel) but on its environment that made appearance of the great philosophical systems possible. And university courses in philosophy are an important part of the environment [10]. The courses in history of philosophy were the basis for philosophical education as such. At the same time philosophy plays an important role for education. One could suppose that Wolfson created his course in dialectical materialism under a significant influence of German university tradition and courses in history of philosophy especially. In our opinion it is possible to speak about something like a localization of German university tradition with its emphasis on history of philosophy in the form the course of dialectical materialism in the more general context of transfer knowledge from West into former Russian Empire. Such a transfer is a well known phenomena for researchers, but they usually analyzed transfer of ideas or concepts. For example, A. Koyre, stated that «Russian philosophical language was formed as a copy of the German terms» [11, p. 169]. In our case situation is even more complicated, because we could speak not only about transfer of idea and concepts (the situation with the concept negation of negation was analyzed previously) but transfer of conceptual vision and even schemes. And what is very important, we analyzed not only an acceptance of abstract philosophical schemes but schemes from area of philosophical education applied to the structurally similar situation.

The question about epistemological status of dialectical materialism is very important for Wolfson and his answer is not the most obvious. He insisted on scientific and philosophical character of dialectical materialism but not only such one. He insists that dialectical materialism differs from the scientific one. He writes that «dialectical materialism is, according to Engel's well-known statement, no more a philosophy but a world view which realizes itself not in a special "science of all sciences" but in sciences themselves... it is a philosophy in the highest degree of science, but not above it» [5, p. 4]. Dialectical materialism is, therefore, an important part of a new scientific world view. Such a vision is similar to German interpretation of science as *Wissenschaft* which has important ethical and world view aspects [12].

Form and structure of Wolfson's course could be questioned from didactic positions. It is presented in a form of a narrative in general, almost without schematization and formal definitions that could be useful and even expected concerning philosophically unprepared audience of the course. For example, Wolfson starts the second part of the course concerning Dialectical materialism itself not with a formal definition but with a statement that it is «genially concluded result of all the previous development of philosophical thought» [5, p. 91]. And even the structure of the course which starts with the period of Antiquity («Materialism in the Antique world») is not obvious. Professor Katzenbogen, for example, starts his lectures in Marxist sociology with introductory chapters, concerning questions about essence of sociology as a science, its methodology etc. and turns to the history of sociology only in the second part of his book. One could say that logic of history dominates in the narrative and even replaces the logic of the curriculum. It fits to the narrative of historical approach in its Marxist interpretation but at the same time it fits to the German university philosophical narrative with its interest to the history of philosophy. Such an interest is presented not only in Hegelianism genealogically similar to Marxism but and in other philosophical schools, Neocantianism, for example. Study of history of philosophy even in more schematic variant is interpreted as a good (if not the best or even the only possible) form of introduction into philosophy as such.

As it has been already mentioned previously the task for Wolfson (and other lecturers-pioneers in Dialectical materialism) was not trivial and easy. The Marxist doctrine as it was presented in classical works was a very heterogeneous mix of different discourses from different areas (philosophy, political ideology, social and natural sciences etc.). The doctrine itself was not stable and changes significantly according to inner (first of all, political and ideological) causes. Its epistemological (as a philosophy or science or something else) and social status (as a university course for ideological preparation) was unclear. To present such

a doctrine in a short form of course of lectures addressed to philosophically unprepared audience was if not a challenge than at least not a trivial task. And a reference to the German tradition of study of philosophy with history of philosophy as its basis seems to us as one of the best and at the same time one of the more logical and obvious decisions in this situation. First of all, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of German philosophy for Russian (or Russian-speaking) philosophical tradition therefore reference to German philosophy is more than natural. Secondly, German philosophy contains such an important for the Soviet philosophy schools as Marxism and Hegelianism. Thirdly, reference to the history of philosophy is rather

obvious and intuitively acceptable, letting to structure the material according to its logic of inner development. At the same time such a classification of material (according to the vision of history of philosophy) appeals to some objective (or pretending to be objective) and rather obvious reasons. Fourthly, appeal to history of philosophy lets to show old and historically rooted foundations of Marxist philosophy (including dialectical materialism) and presenting it as philosophical school with a long history and tradition. And, last but not least, it lets to stabilize polemical Marxist discourse, to make it more stable and grounded and to structure a narrative of the textbook somehow for didactic purposes.

### Conclusions

The first Soviet course in dialectical materialism was developed mainly for educational practices oriented toward wide and often non-professional audience to present popular introduction into Marxist world view. The peculiarity of the period that it is a period of canon's formation and the course is rather heterogeneous and combines elements of different philosophical, scientific, ideological discourses. The language, structure and content of the course in dialectical materialism is under a significant influence of German university tradition and courses in history of philosophy especially. The part in history of philosophy plays surprisingly important role in the structure of the whole course. In our opinion it is

possible to speak about something like a localization of German university tradition with its emphasis on history of philosophy in the form the course of dialectical materialism in the more general context of transfer knowledge from West into former Russian Empire. And a reference to the German tradition of study of philosophy with history of philosophy as its basis seems to be one of the more logical and obvious decisions in this situation and correspond to the great influence of the German philosophy on the Russian-speaking intellectual tradition. At the same time reference to the history of philosophy helps to legitimize and to stabilize polemical Marxist discourse.

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