Back to Kant, or Forward to Enlightenment: The Particularities and Issues of Russian Neo-Kantianism

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Back to Kant, or Forward to Enlightenment: The Particularities and Issues of Russian Neo-Kantianism

The article discusses the phenomenon of Russian Neo-Kantianism in the early twentieth century, looks at the main reasons for interest in Neo-Kantianism, and analyzes why German Neo-Kantian centers were so popular among Russian students and scholars at the turn of the twentieth century. The author points to the institutions where Neo-Kantianism took root and introduces the individuals who became the leaders of these institutions. The article gives a detailed overview of the themes and issues that occupied Russian Neo-Kantians before 1917, as well as the development of these issues in the postrevolutionary period both in Soviet Russia and by Russian Neo-Kantians abroad. An emphasis is made on the original ideas and concepts formulated by Russian Neo-Kantians.


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Translated by Peter Golub.
In 1915, Aleksei Toporkov (1882–1934), a former Russian student of Hermann Cohen at Marburg University, published an article in a popular periodical in which he explained why Neo-Kantianism was so appealing in Russia and what distinguished Russian Neo-Kantianism from the German: “…Kantianism helps in the best way possible the Russian individual, who is almost always in a state of chaos when it comes to philosophy, to understand the contradictions inherent in diverse experience. It orders the mind and thereby fosters creativity and preaching.”¹ In a certain interpretation, Neo-Kantianism “doesn’t define a worldview,” that is, “a Kantian may be a revolutionary, a reactionary, an atheist, or a theist.” Therefore, Toporkov concludes, “Russian Kantianism is perhaps even more correct than German Kantianism” since German Neo-Kantianism “essentially strives only to provide the method and to formulate the prerequisites of speculation, but gradually becomes a worldview and a doctrine.” Russian Neo-Kantianism, “accepting only methodology and criticism, essentially allows multiple ‘beliefs,’ lying beyond criticism and science. In a sense, Western Kantianism is the limit and end, while Russian Kantianism is the beginning and aspiration.”²

In his assessment, albeit in popular form, Toporkov described the state of philosophy in prerevolutionary Russia, the allure of Neo-Kantianism for Russian intellectuals, and the particulars that this philosophical trend gained in the context of Russian philosophy and Russian culture in general. The task of the present discussion is to refine, detail, and explain the characteristics of this philosophical movement in Russia. Striving for historical authenticity, I will attempt to let the protagonists—the Russian Neo-Kantians—speak for themselves as much as possible.

**Why was Neo-Kantianism so appealing in Russia?**

The main reasons for the appeal of Neo-Kantianism in Russia were of both scholarly and institutional character. The former relates to the general state of affairs in Europe and Russia. In the second half of the nineteenth century, new discoveries in mathematics and natural science (as well as intense
differentiation within the object of humanities—culminating in the granting of scientific status to sociology and psychology) no longer fit inside the speculative constructions of the philosophical systems of post-Kantian idealism, or inside the simplified schemas of naïve materialism, with its uncritical worship of empirical methods that became a “truly metaphysical cult,” as described by the Russian Neo-Kantian, Vasily Seseman (1884–1963), in his explanation for the emergence of Neo-Kantianism.³ There was a need for flexible methodology and a sophisticated philosophical system that could account for both the gathering pace of scientific progress and its attendant sociocultural phenomena, as well as to address specific methodological problems, such as separating the objectives of philosophy and psychology, and consequently excising the remnants of psychology and empiricism from philosophy. German Neo-Kantianism set itself the task of creating just such a philosophy and methodology. The emergence of Neo-Kantianism in Russia meant, first, that scientific progress and social processes were taking place in Russia no less vigorously than in the West, and it demanded a philosophical explanation, and second, that the Russian intellectual community needed a scientifically grounded philosophy to counter the mystical-religious thinking, which starting in the 1900s began referring to itself as the authentically Russian national philosophy.⁴

The specification and secularization of philosophy became two aspects of the same process, that is, the formation of science-oriented philosophy in Russia. On the one hand, the goal was to define the specific method and subject of philosophy, distinct from the methods and subjects of other sciences, especially psychology and theology; on the other hand, the goal was to cleanse philosophy of the ideological component, especially religion. Only the realization of these goals would grant philosophy the status of an independent scientific discipline. This was well understood by the young Russian philosophers who returned to Russia from the German Neo-Kantian centers. Thus, the reception of Neo-Kantian ideas took place during a period of Russian philosophical history that could be perfectly described by E. Cassirer’s words with respect to the flourishing of the Enlightenment and its apotheosis in Kantian philosophy: it was “a special phase of that whole intellectual development through which modern philosophic thought gained its characteristic self-confidence and self-consciousness.”⁵ The same idea was expressed by the Russian Neo-Kantian Boris Yakovenko (1884–1949), whose 1910 article “O zadachakh filosofii v Rossi” [On the Tasks of Philosophy in Russia] preceded Cassirer’s words: “It is time for philosophy to awake for self-evaluation,” to become autonomous and independent “from religious faith, and from the influence of specific scientific disciplines,” because only such a philosophy is free “to create here in Russia a true philosophical tradition.”⁶
method and object of such a philosophy, according to Yakovenko, had already been discovered and formulated by Kant. The institutional cause of the spread of Neo-Kantianism in Russia was the common practice of students and graduates in the second half of the nineteenth century traveling abroad before entering a professional field. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was a significant difference between Russian and German universities in terms of both content and style. At this time in Russia, both academic and so-called “free” philosophy was dominated by mystical-religious philosophers. Alexei Losev, a junior representative of this trend, provides a succinct statement regarding the state of Russian philosophy of this period: “Anyone who values in philosophy, first of all, the system of logical certainty, the clarity of dialectics, in short, the scientific, can with a clear conscience ignore Russian philosophy.” By that time in Europe, the philosophy of Kant was popular. In addition, the completeness of collections of philosophical literature stocked in Russian university libraries left much to be desired. Therefore, it is not surprising that Russian scholars went abroad to access the intellectual treasures of the time, and Germany was their foremost destination, the Neo-Kantian core of which was gaining growing popularity in Europe and beyond. Added to these purely scholarly and pedagogical reasons was Russia’s political situation. The decision to study abroad was often motivated by either political persecution, which kept applicants from entering institutions of higher education (as was the case of Dmitry Gawronsky (1883–1949) who went to Marburg without even completing his secondary education) or the result of discriminatory laws of the tsar’s government that limited access to Russian universities based on religious affiliation (first of which was affiliation with the Jewish religion).

The most famous Neo-Kantian centers in Germany were the universities of Marburg, Heidelberg, and Freiburg. The two major Neo-Kantian schools emerged in Marburg and Baden attracting students from all over the world and especially from Russia. These “schools” had a number of specific qualities that appealed to young philosophers.

First, the Neo-Kantian centers gathered students and scholars united by a common desire to find a modern, productive philosophical system and corresponding philosophical method. The specific details of a certain system and method offered by the head of a specific “school” was what distinguished one “school” from another. Explaining the reasons for “using the term ‘school’ … to designate certain groups of individuals,” the Russian Neo-Kantian Alexander Saccetti (1881–1966) pointed out that “all were united by the recognition of a general principle, namely, the principle of the transcendental method; at the same time, division can be seen within a school based on the work and specialization in certain branches of philosophical knowledge.”
Second, entrants learned to think in these Neo-Kantian centers in accordance with the developed methodology of the school’s founder, which allowed for an organic assimilation of the philosophical system. This feature distinguishes a philosophical school from any other academic community, and might be called “formative” in the specific sense of the German bilden, meaning to educate, form, and enlighten. This did not imply imposing specific research principles on every student, but cultivating a culture of thinking for further independent work. Thus, Yakovenko described the founders of the Neo-Kantian schools as the teachers “who philosophically educated the new twentieth century.”

A similar approach to philosophy was espoused by the Russian philosopher and Moscow professor Sergey N. Trubetskoy, when he called on his students to systematically study the history of philosophy. “Here [in Russia—N.D.] … where intellectual schools are unknown, arbitrary philosophizing is the norm. Random readings and disputes, randomness of education and character, coupled with the absence of proper mental discipline, is what often defines our whole philosophy.” This was the “mental discipline” scholars from across Russia received in the Neo-Kantian centers.

Third, the Neo-Kantian schools offered, in the words of one of their students, Fyodor Stepun (1884–1965), “a solid professional and technical foundation,” as well as a specific research program that framed centuries of philosophical tradition. The Marburg school of Neo-Kantianism was particularly distinguished by its rigor and breadth. According to Yakovenko, this school was known for its “unity of tendency, consistency of argumentation, clarity of principles, certainty of view, [and] overall discipline.”

Evgeny Spektorsky (1875–1951), another scholar influenced by the Marburg school in the 1900s, wrote that the philosophy of the Marburg school was seen as the “philosophy of humanism and the enlightenment,” as a representative of a “long historical tradition and tendency that … went back to Socrates,” and its leader, Hermann Cohen, was viewed, in the words of the other Russian Neo-Kantian, Boris Vysheslavtsev (1877–1954), as “the successor of the rationalism of the Enlightenment.”

Fourth, the Neo-Kantian centers gave students the unique opportunity to freely and productively argue with reputable professors. This was appreciated by all who studied in these schools and led to the evolution of an “invisible college” where tradition and the principles of philosophizing were not confined to the static framework of the printed text, but were voiced and developed through lively debate. Boris Vogt (1875–1946), the “leader and pioneer” of the Marburg Neo-Kantianism in Russia, noted this in a letter (1924) he wrote to Paul Natorp on behalf of his Russian students, congratulating the German professor on his seventieth birthday:
“Your work has always been a joint, living effort with your younger friends and disciples…. Years, decades will pass, but the spirit of free inquiry of the philosophical school founded by you and Hermann Cohen will live on in your and our students, a school founded in the small and dear town of Marburg that has since become a factor of world culture.”

The free scholarly discourse and culture of philosophical reflection, inculcated in German Neo-Kantian centers, provided Russian Neo-Kantians with the opportunity to further develop and transform the positions underlying the philosophical concepts of their German teachers. Nicolai Hartmann (1882–1950), who studied at St. Petersburg University but reached philosophical maturity at Marburg and later became a famous German philosopher, knew as early as 1911 that sooner or later the “huge potential energy” of the younger generation of the school would spill over its borders. While “the young generation is not ready to ‘invent’ a new method,” it “should incorporate a mature method within itself,” remaining in the theoretical position of the school.

Indeed, from the beginning of the Neo-Kantian movement in Russia, Russian students of the Marburg and Baden schools were aware that their “philosophical work based on the unconditional assimilation of the Western inheritance … would inevitably incorporate existing [Russian] … original and strong cultural motifs … and thus endlessly enrich the philosophical tradition of the world.”

With time, this unique phenomenon of Russian intellectual history came to pass.

The institutionalization of Russian Neo-Kantianism

Upon their return to Russia, the students of Neo-Kantianism created a variety of philosophical associations—from informal study groups to philosophical societies.

According to the unanimous recognition of his contemporaries, the first Russian Neo-Kantian was the philosopher, psychologist, and St. Petersburg University professor Alexander Vvedensky (1856–1925). However, he was not a Neo-Kantian in the narrow sense of the word, that is, a philosopher who matured under the direct influence of one of the German Neo-Kantian schools. His philosophical position was predominantly influenced by German philosophers who were the forerunners of Neo-Kantianism—Kuno Fischer and Friedrich Lange—as well as the philosophy of post-Kantian idealism. Vvedensky did not create an institutionally specific philosophical school. However, his work as a scholar, teacher, and enlightener in every way contributed to the spread and strengthening of critical philosophy in Russia, and played a seminal role in the appearance of Russian Neo-Kantianism in the last
third of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\textsuperscript{23} It was under Vvedensky’s influence that many young St. Petersburg intellectuals discovered Kant and Neo-Kantianism: Ivan Lapshin (1870–1952), Nicolai Hartmann, Vasily Seseman, Alexander Veideman (1879–1943), Nikolai Boldyrev (1883–1929), Nicolai von Bubnoff (1880–1962), Jacob Gordin (1896–1947), and in part, Sergei Hessen (1887–1950). Those who were not personally acquainted with him were nonetheless exposed to his ideas through his articles, books, and translations, thanks to which the ideas of criticism were chiefly popularized.\textsuperscript{24}

One of the first Neo-Kantian philosophical schools in Russia was created by Pavel Novgorodtsev (1866–1924) at the Law Department of Moscow State University. According to Nikolai Alekseev (1879–1964), who first studied with Novgorodtsev in Russia before going to Germany, Novgorodtsev “was at the time \[\sim 1900s—N.D.\] a Kantian oriented mostly on Windelband’s Heidelberg school. However, the ‘school’ of Novgorodtsev was distinguished by wide tolerance. He was able to gather around himself materialists and skeptics, empiriocriticists and Hegelians—the only criterion was that they were philosophers.”\textsuperscript{25} Novgorodtsev’s school produced thinkers as diverse as Vasily Savalsky (1873–1915), Ivan Ilyin (1883–1954), and Boris Vysheslavtsev. During their early philosophical development, all these men were Neo-Kantians, but later on only Savalsky, who died young, remained a Neo-Kantian. Novgorodtsev himself gradually abandoned Neo-Kantianism in favor of a kind of Eurasian Orthodox mysticism.

Another school was formed around a seminar held at St. Petersburg State University led by historian, critical philosopher, and full member of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences Alexander Lappo-Danilevsky (1863–1919). The seminar, which focused on the methodology of history, was taught continuously by Lappo-Danilevsky from 1887 until his death in 1919. His disciple and fellow Neo-Kantian Nikolai Boldyrev wrote, “there seems hardly a philosopher of the younger generations in St. Petersburg who has not passed through his school.”\textsuperscript{26} The seminar had a broad scope and seriously considered the theoretical questions that came out of the two major German Neo-Kantian schools.

The most famous Russian Neo-Kantian philosophical group was associated with the international annual philosophical journal \textit{Logos}.\textsuperscript{27} The Russian-language edition of the publication included the Baden School philosophers Fyodor Stepun, Sergei Hessen, and Boris Yakovenko. They worked with many Russian Neo-Kantians, including: Bogdan Kistiakovsky (1868–1920), Vasily Seseman, Gavriil Gordon (1885–1942), Nikolai Boldyrev, Leonid Gabrilovich (1878–1953), Ivan Ilyin, Matvei Rubinstein (1878–1953), Henry Lanz (1886–1945), and others. In the eyes of their opposition, they represented a
cohesive and productive group. In August 1912, Sergey Bulgakov, religious philosopher and member of the editorial board of the publishing house Put’, wrote to Vladimir Ern: “We, as a collective, suffer blow after blow, while the little Hessenists are thriving.”28 Unfortunately, the “Logos” group did not develop into a philosophical school in the narrow sense of the word, though it did have a unique institutional status thanks to its own publication. The main reason for this was the journal’s lack of a united and well-defined scholarly platform. Furthermore, as a result of their international publication, the “Logos” philosophers were in constant contact with their Western counterparts, and therefore apparently did not feel the need to organize their own school on Russian soil.

Another indication of enhancing the positions of Neo-Kantian philosophy in Russia is the formation of new philosophical societies (as opposed to religious-philosophical) that were established between 1909 and 1914. The Friends of Philosophy Society was formed in St. Petersburg (1909) with the participation of Hessen, and also included the brothers Nikolai and Dmitry Boldyrev, Alexander Veideman, and Vasily Seseman.29 The St. Petersburg Philosophical Assembly was founded in 1911, first chaired by Veideman, and from 1914 by Seseman.30 The Scientific and Philosophical Society was founded in 1912, and resumed activities in January 1914. Headed by Nikolai Alekseev, the Moscow Society for Study of Scientific-Philosophical Problems was established in January 20, 1914.31

Within the context of a private seminar, a “school” was developed led by Boris Vogt in 1904 according to the principle of disciplinary distinction and strict separation of philosophy from every sort of ideology. Vogt was described by Andrei Bely, his friend and student in 1904–08, as having been “unfairly ousted from the university chair.” Each person “found exactly what he was looking for: as a pianist positions the fingers [of his pupils—N.D.], he positioned the logical apparatus without touching the content of a worldview. The most important thing for him was methodological clarity.”32 In his seminar on Kant and Cohen, Vogt embodied the philosophical principles of his Marburg teachers. This school lasted until Vogt’s death in 1946—that is, it existed in Soviet Russia, although as a deeply intellectually underground phenomenon. Besides Andrei Bely, this unofficial school produced scholars in various fields, including philosophers Pavel Kopnin (1922–1971) and Mark Turovsky (1922–1994), the lawyer and philosopher Joseph Levin (1901–1984), and the literary critics Alexei Chicherin (1900–1989) and Boris Gornung (1899–1976).

I will conclude this section by noting that if in the early 1900s young Russian philosophers could be divided along German Neo-Kantian lines (i.e., Marburg vs. Baden), starting from the 1910s Russian Neo-Kantians
cohered more as one group, united together under the increasing ideological and institutional pressure of the religious philosophers.

The issues of Russian Neo-Kantianism

A content analysis of the works of Russian Neo-Kantians allows us to roughly divide them, keeping in mind the German Neo-Kantian “tradition,” into the “German-Neo-Kantian” studies and the “Russian-Neo-Kantian” ones.

In Russia, the “German Neo-Kantian” label can be ascribed to the scientific-methodological work of Otto Buek (1873–1966), Gawronsky, Hartmann, Anatoly Syrtsov (1880–1938), and Hessen. They were devoted to disclosing the philosophical meaning of mathematical or physical theories, and showing the methodological and epistemic commonality of science and philosophy. Hartmann and Seseman worked on questions arising from Greek philosophy (especially Plato, Socrates, and the Pre-Socratics), analyzing their ideas from the perspective of the transcendental method. Vogt and Gordon worked on the methodology of Kant and Cohen; Sergei Rubinstein (1889–1960) and Matvei Rubinstein worked on Hegel; Victoria Salagova and Anatoly Syrtsov worked on Leibniz; Seseman and Yakovenko focused on the theoretical philosophy of the Marburg school; Yakovenko, Hessen, and Aleksei Woden (1870–after 1932) concentrated on the Baden school. Various aspects of Cohen’s philosophy were the focus of Boris Pasternak (1890–1960), Aron Gurlyand (1880–after 1941), Matvei Kagan (1889–1937), S. Rubinstein, Georgy Gurvitch (1894–1965), Aaron Steinberg (1891–1975), Semen Kaplan (1893–1979), Mikhail Schwartz (1873–1946), Jacob Klatskin (1882–1948), and David Koigen (1877–1933). Morality and law were studied by Savalsky, Saccetti, Vysheslavtsev, Kistiakovsky, Hessen, Spektorsky, Alekseev, Koigen, and Lanz. Quite a large number of Russian Neo-Kantian studies were devoted to the philosophy of Fichte. In Germany, the first to undertake this research was Emil Lask, in Russia—Boris Vysheslavtsev. Later, to Vysheslavtsev’s research on Fichte would be added the work of Yakovenko, Lanz, Alexander Kubitsky (1880–1937), Lapshin, Ilyin, and Toporkov.

The label of “Russian-Neo-Kantianism” may be ascribed to work that has aspects particular to Russian culture, which marks it as being a specifically Russian brand of Neo-Kantianism. One of the first examples is Otto Buek’s Neo-Kantian reading of Leo Tolstoy’s moral writings. Later, in exile, Lapshin, Hessen, and Stepun would also provide readings of Tolstoy.
This “literary” line of Russian Neo-Kantianism was later pursued by Vogt, Steinberg, and Kagan in their readings of Alexander Pushkin. However, the main focus of postrevolutionary Russian Neo-Kantian thought was Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The first such reading of Dostoyevsky was provided by Aaron Steinberg in his paper “Dostoevskii kak filosof” [Dostoyevsky as Philosopher], presented at the Petrograd Free Philosophical Association in 1921. The paper became the basis of Steinberg’s book on Dostoyevsky published in Berlin in 1923. In exile, Stepun, Lapshin, Gawronsky, and Hessen also wrote about Dostoyevsky. In Soviet Russia, Vogt worked on an article for the State Academy of Art (GAKhN) titled “O probleme i poniatii zhizni u Dostoevskogo” [On the Problem and Notion of Life in Dostoyevsky] (based on P. Natorp’s book Fjedor Dostojewskis Bedeutung für die gegenwärtige Kulturkrisis (1923)), but, apparently, the project did not come to fruition.

Another important topic for Russian Neo-Kantians crystallized in disputes with Russian religious philosophers, and was formulated as “the problem of the rational and irrational, and their relationship,” where the “irrational” was understood as the psychic, the intuitive. This problem was clearly articulated in Seseman’s article, which immediately identified the author’s own philosophical position as going beyond “strict” Neo-Kantianism toward phenomenology. To some extent the problem of the irrational was addressed in the theoretical works of Hessen, Yakovenko, Lanz, and Pavel Kananov (1883–1967), as well as the historical-philosophical work of Kubitsky and Lanz’s work on Plotinus.

The problem of the irrational likewise found expression in the attempts of Russian Neo-Kantians searching for “a way into being,” the very “way” longed for by Russian religious thinkers and which they could not find in philosophy. In the words of M.M. Bakhtin (who in his youth was fascinated with Hermann Cohen’s work): the religious thinkers “commit the same methodological sin that historical materialism commits: a methodological indiscrimination of what is given and what is set as a task, of what is and what ought to be.” In 1916, Lev Salagov published an article on the relationship between epistemology and ontology. The basic idea was repeated in his article “Sovremennaia gnoseologiiia i ontologiiia” (1922) [Contemporary Epistemology and Ontology], which stated that “traditional epistemology, which determines its object as the content of cognition, essentially answers not an epistemological question, but an ontological one, because the content of cognition is being, in the same way that logical connections are the meaning of the connections of being,” and therefore the epistemic problem should really be put in terms of the ont-epistemological. This idea was supported by Nikolai Boldyrev, who
insisted that the solution to the problem should not be sought in a metaphysics that has its foundation outside reason and not in “frail intuition,” which “is incapable of encompassing being,” and therefore always “placing it outside itself in the transcendent,” but in “logic as the only true metaphysics,” in “cognition as being.”

Another area in which Russian Neo-Kantians made a considerable contribution is the philosophical study of culture and artistic creation. This trend coincided with a general European turn in philosophy toward the “experience of art.” In the first years following the revolution, Andrei Bely produced several new works on the philosophy of art and culture, which clearly paralleled the teachings of the late Natorp and Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms, which, however, remained unknown to Bely. A number of studies were produced by Vogt, Kagan, Saccetti, Toporkov, Gordon, and M. Rubinstein in collaboration with the State Academy of Art (GAKhN). Other Russian Neo-Kantians who emigrated or were exiled after the revolution—for instance, Seseman, Veideman, Stepun, Lapshin, and Lanz—worked on the aesthetic problem abroad.

Veideman, who in the early 1900s played “the role of philosophical godfather to Nicolai Hartmann,” after the revolution presented his own theory that combined Neo-Kantianism, Hegelianism, and phenomenology. Following Rickert, he called his doctrine the “metaphysics of the spirit,” and sought to present “a living, concrete worldview” that differed from both the “religious” and “literary” forms. For Veideman, reason, logic, freedom of thought, and criticism must be the bedrock of philosophy as the “general scientific worldview,” which is the product of combining the “philosophical spirit” of the works of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky with the “philosophical engineering” of the West. In addition, Veideman tried to correct and supplement the Marburg concept of the “doctrine of science,” using Hegel’s and Husserl’s methodological solutions: the dialectical method and intuition. One aspect of Veideman’s system was the aesthetic theory of the “pan-tragic” according to which aesthetics is the “philosophy of the humanitarian world,” a “philosophy” uniting the three forms of the human relationship to the world—art, religion and history—on the basis of their inherent “tragedy.”

Focusing on the tragedy of human existence, Russian Neo-Kantian thought found vivid expression in the philosophy of history and anthropology. Writing in 1905, M. Rubinstein was the first of these thinkers to address the problem of human history. At the beginning of the 1920s, the meaning of history was addressed in the Petrograd works of Steinberg, Bely, Gordin, and N. Boldyrev. In the same year, in the town of Nevel, M. Kagan also did work on the “course of history.” In emigration, these
issues would be picked up by Stepun, N. Alekseev, Steinberg, Kaplan, and Nikolai Reimers (1894–1964). 54

The first Neo-Kantian Russian work to focus on the problems of anthropology should be considered Jacob Gordin’s “Anthropodicy,” 55 which he read to the Philosophical Circle at Petrograd University in December 1921. The text tightly interwove Cohen’s philosophical system and Neo-Kantianism on the whole with the Jewish and Russian religious-philosophical traditions, as well as Western European mysticism and the Kabbalah. The problem of the unity of the individual as a moral, free, and creative being existing as both a historical and unique entity was addressed by Lanz, 56 as well as in one of Pasternak’s last essays (1959). 57 The investigation of this problem is closely related to the study of “applied” philosophy, which the Russian Neo-Kantians (namely Hessen, M. Rubinstein, 58 and Vogt), following Kant, Natorp and partly Rickert, used to frame their understanding of pedagogy and theory of education. However, a substantive “anthropological turn” in Russian Neo-Kantian philosophy can be observed only in the late work of S. Rubinstein. 59

In Soviet Russia, the transformation of Neo-Kantian ideas had two major trends. The first was a fusion with Marxism that resulted from the practical approach to the problem of consciousness in the activity theory, which was prevalent in the works of Cohen’s student Sergei Rubinstein, 60 who became the foremost Soviet psychologist. The second sought to conserve the already developed “classical” Neo-Kantian position, which was reflected, for example, in the works of Boris Vogt. The translation of philosophical knowledge and philosophical tradition, latently helped formulate and resolve certain local problems of Marxist theory (especially in the work of Pavel Kopnin): the problems of the logical foundation of scientific knowledge, the introduction into scientific discourse of the positively determined statement “without a subject there is no object,” the rehabilitation of the concept of the “idea,” and, in general, the anthropological orientation of philosophical investigation. The historical-philosophical work of Russian Neo-Kantians in the Soviet period focused mainly on Aristotle, on Aristotelian logic and methodology (Polivanov, Vogt, and Kubitsky).

Conclusion

Abroad and inside the Soviet Union, Russian Neo-Kantians proved themselves to be productive and worthy heirs of the Neo-Kantian schools and their tradition. They inherited from their German teachers not only existing
philosophies and methodologies, but also unresolved issues that became ever more prevalent in the course of philosophical history, demanding detailed development and subsequent creative investigation, which led to the discovery of new epistemic horizons.

In conclusion, I would like to note the role of Neo-Kantianism in Soviet intellectual history. Living under a total ideological surveillance that was formed as a result of counterrevolutionary upheaval of 1927–38, the Russian Neo-Kantians who remained in Russia managed to achieve the impossible. By applying Aesopian techniques of “cryptography,” which they received from the protest tradition of the Russian intelligentsia, they were able to preserve the relative freedom of spirit in an environment of rigid authoritarian control. The primary task of the “Soviet” Neo-Kantians was to enable the students of their unofficial seminars to read Kant, Cohen, Natorp and Cassirer, and thus join the students to the philosophical tradition of the world. The experience of intellectual resistance built on the uniquely transformed ideas of Neo-Kantianism and the Russian intellectual tradition is a most valuable legacy left to modernity. And these Neo-Kantian ideas and archives are a treasure house of potential discovery that is far from exhausted.

Notes

2. Ibid., pp. 172–73. Note: Although, Toporkov uses the term Kantianism, he is writing specifically about Neo-Kantianism.
4. In 1904, Berdiaev unequivocally juxtaposed the archetypal ontologism of Russian philosophy to German transcendentalism, understanding “being” to signify the “transcendent,” “metaphysical” being “of a concrete spirit of living and individual substance,” that is, God: “The distinction of Russian philosophical thought … gravitates toward metaphysical realism, toward concrete spiritualism.” N.A. Berdiaev, “O novom russkom idealizme,” Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii (1904), no. 75, pp. 683–724.
7. Ibid., p. 654.


30. Perhaps, the Assembly was the philosophical successor of the society mentioned by Hessen.


33. For a bibliography of the works of Russian Neo-Kantians see Dmitrieva, Russkoe neokantianstvo: “Marburg” v Rossii, pp. 432–56.


39. Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), Fund Collection: 941; inventory list 10, unit of storage 654, p. 5.


47. For more on Bely’s interest in Neo-Kantianism, as well as that of Valery Bryusov and Alexander Scriabin, see Dmitrieva, Russkoe neokantianstvo, pp. 334–82.


