

FREUD'S UNKNOWN RUSSIAN PATIENT

In the late spring of 1914 the philosopher Ivan Ilyin underwent seven weeks of intensive therapy with Sigmund Freud in Vienna. It is quite remarkable that thus far no historian of psychoanalysis has noted this strange meeting between such a significant Russian cultural personage and Freud.

At the time he met Freud, Ilyin was a young university lecturer who had studied in Germany. Although successful academically, he struggled with severe personal problems. Dostoevsky once defined the Russian character as “maximalist.” No one was more maximalist than Ilyin. He swung between extremes—between rancor and tender sentimentality, aggressiveness and reverie, intense need for human contact and self-imposed isolation and solitude. Politically he had drifted from one opposite to the other. First, in connection with the 1905 Revolution, he severed relations with his father and distanced himself from his aristocratic family, among the oldest in Russia, and became an adherent of Anarchism and Social Democracy. He is even reported to have attended the December 1905 Social Democratic Congress in Tampere, at which Lenin and Stalin first confronted each other. By the time he met Freud, however, the pendulum had swung in the opposite direction. Now he professed a conservative nationalism of a strongly sentimental bent rooted in Orthodoxy. Conservative not only politically but also aesthetically, he was opposed to modernist currents and had proclaimed Symbolism, which he regarded as a dangerous decadent attack on the sacred foundations of being, to be his archenemy.

Ilyin's newly aroused nationalism may have played a compensatory role. He was actually only half-Russian, since his mother was from an immigrant German family. Thus, behind his political

changeovers there was in fact a dual family heritage. On the one hand, his grandfather and namesake held the heavily symbolic post of keeper of the Kremlin gates. His father (who became a lawyer) had been born in the Kremlin, and was not only named after Tsar Alexander II but was reportedly even his godson. On the other hand, in the "progressive" 1860s, one of his paternal aunts had responded to her strict conservative upbringing by fleeing from the Kremlin and marrying into a noted extended socialist family in Petersburg, about whom she later wrote a well-known memoir. Another paternal aunt married the progressive Jewish pedagogue Yakov Gurevich, who headed his own secondary school in Petersburg and passed on his liberal views to his daughter Lyubov Gurevich, one of Russia's most prominent journalists and the editor of the periodical *Severny vestnik* (*The Northern Messenger*). Seventeen years Ilyin's senior, she became especially close to him. Thus the tension between Moscow Slavophilism and Petersburg liberalism, and that between monarchism and nascent revolutionary notions, was present already in his family background.

Ilyin probably discovered Freud around 1909, the year that psychoanalysis had its first early breakthrough in Moscow. It was at this time that he read Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character*, which abounds in references to deep psychology. In early 1911, he studied with Georg Simmel in Berlin, where he wrote an essay in the spirit of Simmel's philosophy of culture entitled "On Civility" — which was perhaps what came hardest to him — in which he refers in a note to Freud as "a profound and subtle psychologist." During these years he gravitated more or less exclusively to Jewish authorities such as Simmel, Husserl, and Freud. In Berlin as well he kept almost entirely to a circle of Russian Jewish students. It is possible to conclude that this predilection was derived largely from the ease with which he adapted to the Gurevichs as his "alternative family" in Petersburg.

Home in Russia after long sojourns at German universities, in the spring of 1913 Ilyin became acquainted with the composer Nikolay Medtner and his brother Emili. Nikolay Medtner's music, which tended toward the classical at a time when almost everything was subversively avant-gardist, seemed to embody his own

ideals. Nikolay was easy-going, whereas Emilii was a combative, militant anti-modernist who in his criticism portrayed the new music, represented by composers influenced by esotericism such as Aleksandr Scriabin, as a frontal assault on European culture self-evidently centered in Germany. A profound double friendship developed between the Medtner brothers and Ilyin. Emilii had just published his manifesto *Modernism and Music*, which Ilyin enthusiastically welcomed, for it was very much in line with his own new rigidly conservative aesthetic values. He was willing to overlook the fact that the book portrayed modernism as a Jewish conspiracy, but it was a little more difficult for him to accept Medtner's disparagement of Russian culture. Both men were German-Russians, but they differed in their attitudes toward their backgrounds.

Ilyin soon came to Medtner's support and assisted him in his work on *Reflections on Goethe*, through which Medtner attempted to rescue his friend Bely—and ultimately all of Russia—from Rudolf Steiner's "false" claims to Goethe. Ilyin was himself working on a master's thesis on Hegel, so each had his German "research topic." When Medtner's conflict with Bely worsened and his suffering intensified, Ilyin began to recommend that he visit Freud in Vienna. What Medtner told him about his friend Bely's "treachery" and Anthroposophical "aberrations" evidently made his own bilious rejection of Symbolism even more categorical.

By this point in 1913, Freud's works were quite well known in Russia. Ilyin was planning his own pilgrimage to Vienna and probably sent Medtner there on reconnaissance. In October 1913, Medtner contacted Freud in Vienna for a consultation. His positive report home to Ilyin obviously did not fail to produce the desired effect, and in May 1914 Ilyin set off for Vienna for a seven-week course of therapy. His first account in the form of a postcard to Medtner was unreservedly positive. He declared that he had "rather liked our high priest" from the very start. Ilyin was not as generous as his friend when it came to revealing the content of his therapeutic conversations. All we know is that the sessions with Freud were valuable and that they seem to have helped him write his dissertation on Hegel.

Significantly enough, Ilyin's therapy partly coincided with the final phase of Freud's treatment of the "Wolfman," Sergey Pankeev. Freud points out in his case study that it was in this final stage that everything fell into place in Pankeev's therapy and he managed to uncover his patient's "primal trauma." One wonders whether Ilyin's treatment might not have provided some illuminating insights. Ilyin and Pankeev belonged to the same generation of Russian intelligentsia, and they had the same vivid memories of 1905. As has been noted elsewhere, Ilyin seemed to be a character straight out of one of Dostoevsky's novels. Andrey Bely, for example, compared him to Nikolay Stavrogin in *The Possessed*. Even more appropriate, perhaps, are the four Karamazov brothers. He seemed to possess traits of all of them: the hyperintellectual Ivan, the pious Alyosha, the violently emotional Mitya, and the infernal Smerdyakov. Considering the fierce falling out he had with his father in 1905, he may well have lent something to Nikolay Ableukhov in *Petersburg*.

As he was beginning his work on Dostoevsky, Freud probably had both Pankeev and Ilyin in mind when, in an often quoted 1920 letter to Stefan Zweig, he characterized emotional dualism, or the ability to embrace opposite emotional states and push them to an extreme, as archetypically Russian. Perhaps this study should be linked not only to Pankeev, as it has been already, but also to Freud's experiences with Ilyin. Freud highlights the masochistic and latent homosexual traits in Dostoevsky's personality as reflected in his protagonists. Similar tendencies would seem to underlie Ilyin's difficulties and psychic swings. Just like Dostoevsky, Ilyin was a revolutionary who switched sides and went from socialist rebellion to monarchism and nationalism.

In a lecture delivered to a circle of Moscow philosophy students, the first autumn of the war in 1914 Ilyin spoke of the need for the artistic intelligentsia to process "all the wounds in the tissue of the soul that have marked us since childhood, that live on unhealed throughout our lives and gnaw at the soul, rendering many of us victims of neurasthenia and all manner of morbid perversions." He went on, with profound emotion, to address child battering, perhaps on the basis of his own experience. Freud had brought him to insight but had hardly healed his wounds,

Freud's Unknown Russian Patient

and his irritable aggressiveness had not diminished. In the fall of 1914 he became closer friends with Nikolay Medtner, who was suffering from depression. He had lost Emiliï's day-to-day support, since they were now separated by the war. Like Emiliï, Nikolay reacted to the war between Russia and Germany as a personal trauma. He was afflicted with apathy and creative impotence, and there was even talk of Ilyin psychoanalyzing him on his own.

During these months after returning from Vienna, Ilyin was obsessed with psychoanalysis, diagnosing everything and everyone in Freudian terms, reducing every personal problem to neurotic symptoms, and according to one observer, psychoanalyzing every little gesture of those around him. His negative attitude to Symbolism reached the boiling point after Emiliï Medtner's near breakdown in the wake of Bely's conversion to Anthroposophy. Ilyin believed that he could use Freud's tools to penetrate the minds of the leading Symbolist figures. He apparently suspected several of them to be latent homosexuals. Perhaps, he recognized in them traits of his own of which he had become aware and was attempting to address. He was married to a philosopher colleague, Natalya, but at the same time had become involved in a few infatuated friendships with men. This might explain his documented, mysterious extreme aversion toward the Symbolist writers as a form of projection or struggle with his own demons.

Now that Bely had fled to Anthroposophy and was no longer in the picture, Vyacheslav Ivanov, who had recently moved to Moscow from Petersburg, became Ilyin's *bête noire*. Ivanov was a classical scholar, trained in philosophy, and deeply interested in music, which made him Ilyin's rival in his own fields. He had a Dionysian personality, and in fact his entire Symbolist doctrine was based on the cult of Dionysus. He had earlier attempted to conduct



Ivan Ilyin, 1916.

a couple of bisexual cohabitation experiments, and had moreover come close to violating the incest taboo when he remarried with his stepdaughter a few years after his wife's death. All this must have made him seem particularly provocative to Ilyin—here was a self-assertive double whose lack of inhibition called into question and undermined both his ideological foundations and his superego defenses. This was a frequent pattern in Russia's thoroughly boundary-transcendent culture around the turn of the century, where personality, politics, and ideology became tightly intertwined in friendships and conflicts.

When in the fall of 1914 religious philosophers, headed by Vyacheslav Ivanov, enunciated their view of the war at the Religious-Philosophical Society in Moscow, Ilyin was pointedly absent. Shortly thereafter, he delivered his own patriotic lecture on "The Spiritual Significance of the War." It came out a few months later in book form, dedicated to Nikolay Medtner, who had now become his supreme cult figure. His antagonistic doppelganger relationship with Ivanov was thereby only reinforced, for Ivanov had at this time established close personal ties to the increasingly extravagant modernist composer Scriabin, who with Sergey Rakhmaninov was Nikolay's chief rival on the Russian concert stage. Ivanov's poetry had made a strong impression on Scriabin, who in November 1914 read aloud to him the text of "Preliminary Act," the prelude to a grandiose musical temple rite he was planning. Ivanov enthusiastically supported him in this somewhat megalomaniacal occult-theurgic project, by which Scriabin hoped to help lead Russia into a new spiritual dimension. Then Scriabin died suddenly in April 1915. Ivanov wrote two sonnets to his memory.

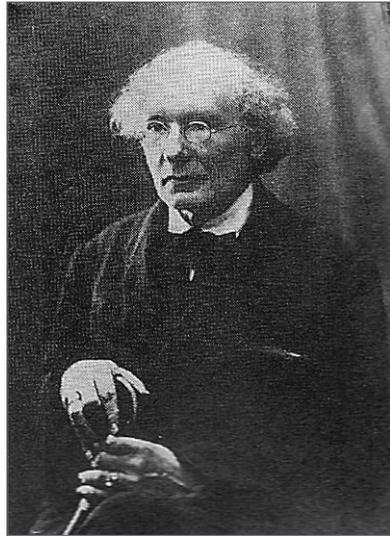
In the fall of 1915, Ivanov wrote "Scriabin's View of Art," a lecture he delivered in December. At this point something happened that, as far as Ilyin was concerned, was not supposed to happen. Deprived of the object of his cult, Ivanov began to gravitate toward Nikolay Medtner. In early November, Sergey Kusevitsky performed a memorial concert for Scriabin in Moscow. The program included *Poème de l'Extase* and *Prometheus*. During the intermission, Ilyin saw Ivanov, at a distance, go up to Nikolay Medtner and inquire about paying him a visit (and hinting at possible collaboration). Ilyin

was furious. The "double" was attempting to crowd him out and "conquer" the malleable, passive Nikolay and put him in Scriabin's place for his own ulterior motives. He had already been vexed by the fact that the prominent conductor Kusevitsky, who had now once again taken up Scriabin's music after a much noted break with it a few years earlier, had begun associating with Nikolay. All this was too much for Ilyin.

As early as 1912, Ilyin had admitted to Lyubov Gurevich that his interests were divided between Stanislavsky's "studio," where he even hoped to become an "idea consultant," and the psychiatric clinic, that is, between the theater and therapy. Bely reports that Ilyin sometimes would stand behind Ivanov, mimicking and caricaturing his gestures and openly posing as a double. Here he seems to have been combining his two extremes, both playing theater and enacting his "diagnosis" of Ivanov. Now he took this game one step further, writing a letter to Nikolay Medtner in Ivanov's name, in which he produced a sophisticated parody of the poet's archaizing language and at the same time made sexual innuendos in an attempt to expose his rival's hidden pretensions.

The letter turned out to be a successful practical joke. Nikolay took it quite seriously and very much to heart. He found it to be "unnecessarily bombastic" and at the same time "somewhat derisive." He decided to go to Ivanov and tell him frankly how different and essentially alien they were to each other. He did not get that far, however, because Ilyin forestalled him and revealed the ruse in time. After this incident Ivanov made no further efforts to get closer to Nikolay.

After the letter Ilyin appeared to be through with Ivanov. Now he was waiting to settle accounts with Bely on behalf of both



Vyacheslav Ivanov, 1913.

himself and Emilii Medtner. It took a while, but the time came. After Bely's frontal attack on Medtner in *Rudolf Steiner and Goethe in the Contemporary World View*, Ilyin focused all his animosity on Bely. In mid-February 1917, just before the Revolution and the overthrow of the tsar, he stood up in defense of his cherished friend in an extremely aggressive open letter to Bely in which the assault on Medtner was interpreted as a disease symptom, evidence of the degeneration and decay permeating the new literature. In early March, just as the monarchy fell, another open letter with the same message was sent to philosopher Prince Evgeny Trubetskoy. Ilyin obviously considered literature responsible for the Revolution, so there was some logic in his raging diatribes. When the second, Bolshevik upheaval occurred in the fall, he seemed to have regarded it to an even higher degree as a consequence of the Symbolists' moral dissolution. Andrey Bely and Aleksandr Blok were among the first writers to greet the new order in their poetry.

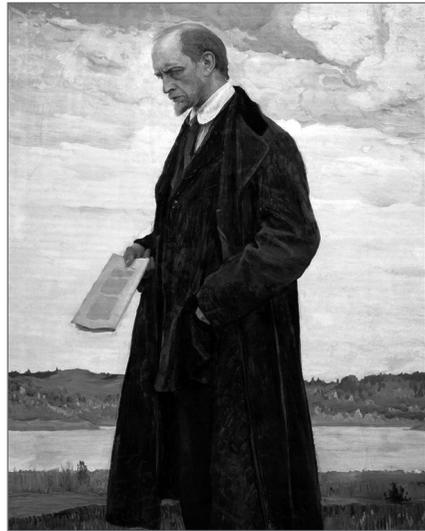
After the October revolution, Ilyin became active as an anti-Soviet professor of philosophy and was arrested several times. Together with some psychiatrists and others, in 1921 he started a psychoanalytical society, dedicated primarily to researching the conditions of "creation," that partly helped to lay the foundation for several years of intensive Freudian activity in the new Soviet state. A year later, with a collective death penalty hanging over them, he and some 200 leading intellectuals and academics in various fields, among them representatives of idealist, non-materialist philosophy, were thrown out of Russia. In exile in Berlin he again metamorphosed, setting aside philosophy and dedicating himself body and soul to the anti-Soviet struggle. From his base in Berlin he wrote books and countless articles and traveled tirelessly around Europe delivering hundreds of lectures on the poison of Bolshevism and Russia's imminent doom.

Ilyin never again uttered a single word about either his socialist or psychoanalytical past. He would inevitably throw in his lot with Fascism. He was an early admirer of Mussolini, and in 1932 he wrote about Germany's immediate need of a "Führer." On the occasion of the "Machtübernahme" in 1933, he sent a personal congratulatory telegram to Hitler and initiated collaboration with

Freud's Unknown Russian Patient

Goebbels' Ministry of Propaganda. The old maximalist was true to form: from a Judeophile he had become a kind of anti-Semitic agitator who denounced "Jewish Bolsheviks" in his writings. However, he eventually found it extremely difficult to cooperate with the Nazis. In 1938, after being interrogated by Alfred Rosenberg's right-hand man, he was for the second time thrown out of a totalitarian country. His old friend Sergey Rakhmaninov helped him get to Switzerland. He settled down in Zurich, where he had once visited Emilii Medtner and even lectured at Jung's Psychological Club.

Ilyin lived until 1954. He sometimes proclaimed that his only real concern was Russia. As he himself put it, he was forever a child in Mother Russia's arms. One gets the feeling that his sharp intellect was nearly powerless in the face of his infantile inhibitions.



*Ivan Ilyin as **The Thinker**
by Mikhail Nesterov,
1921-1922.*