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On the Meaning of History

Gennadiy V. Boldyguin*

University for Humanities

19 Student Str., Ekaterinburg, 620049 Russia

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The article is devoted to historical knowledge that the author, by analogy with “the meaning of life” calls “the meaning of history”. This aim cannot be the idea of history as a tool useful for unhistorical purposes. The meaning of history is in establishing the truth and in participation in the intellectual process, called “the court of history”.

Keywords: the meaning of history, the court of history, the necessity and inevitability, historical reconstruction, purpose, motive.

The problem of *the meaning of history* is one of the most complex issues of the European science tradition. Its foundation dates back from the cult of *truth* which was formed in the Ancient Hellas, and which was supposed to be reached and proved regardless of whether genuine knowledge complied to the beliefs of the majority or it contradicted them, whether it was pleasant to an individual, people or the mankind or this knowledge was bitter and disgusting, whether it was useful or useless.

Such a cult was not familiar to the great ancient oriental civilizations that were deprived of humiliating (as it was regarded then) requirement for a *guru*, a *teacher*, a *sensei* to prove to everybody and especially to the gosling pupils the verity of his statements. Even in the second half of the 19th century the cult of truth for truth sake was unknown to the Chinese, who decided to deprive the translation of the Euclidian geometry schoolbook into Chinese of all the proofs, considering them practically useless, as

problems could be solved with the knowledge of theorems without the knowledge of their proving. Apparently, they considered mathematical proving as a certain intellectual decoration, a certain *European ceremony*.

Herodotus, who came from Hellenic world, was not a zealous adept of the cult of truth, which become very popular in Attic and Italic periods of his life, though he was critical about authenticity of the certain sources of his spoken stories that were published later by his followers. Those published stories were called *History*, and this title was given either by himself or by his followers. Properly speaking, Herodotus was not a *historian*. Hellenes called the genre of his stories *logography* – word description of geographic, ethnographic and historical data provided by travelers who came back home. Many centuries after, retired soldiers from Suvorov’s army used similar stories to broaden the mind of their fellow villagers. The first historian in today’s meaning of this word was Thucydides, and his *History of*

Peloponnesian War even in today's standards is an example of historical reconstruction of *what*, *where* and *when* it had happened, without having the goal of edification and without any other practical goal. Thucydides' book has become for his contemporaries an example of the scrupulous reconstruction of the past, and for us – the main source of knowledge about the war between Sparta and Athens.

But why do we need this knowledge about the battles, heroic deeds, alliances and betrayal that took place about two thousand years ago? What are we looking for in those descriptions? And what were Thucydides' contemporaries looking there for? What made him describe the events that ended up nowhere and that will never happen again?

All these and the similar questions excited even those who were involved in the cult of theoretical (contemplative)¹ knowledge, which (unlike practical knowledge about the acts that make it possible to achieve the required results) only gave useless truth to the cognizer. Indeed, what was the use for barbers and poorly educated craftsmen who put into practice the Industrial revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries in theoretical mechanics (that they ignored) and in thermal technology (that only emerged after the invention of the steam engine)? Why do we need the knowledge of the *laws of nature* that we cannot change and that similarly to the legal laws, to authorize *everything* that is not prohibited, without saying a word on what does all this mean?

The problem of the use of knowledge about what is existing without saying how this existing can be changed, or how it can be used in personal purposes, emerged in parallel with formation of the basis of *theoretical* cognition. Even Plato, who was the first to describe disinterested *love for knowledge*, without which *love for wisdom* that he admired so much was impossible, tells

an anecdote about Thales, who proved the use of astronomical observations, due to which he predicted a good harvest of olives and made good money on creameries. Many times European thinkers raised an issue of the *use of history*: particularly the issue of goals, to achieve which the history could be used as a *tool*, and the issue of ways of using it.

F. Nietzsche in his work '*Use and Abuse of History for Life*' gave the best answer to this question. Nietzsche, who believed *creation* (creation of the new) to be the major attribute of *life*, and who opposed it to *death*, considered history with its inclination for archaic extremely harmful. In his opinion, creation was possible only in dusky atmosphere of ignorance, and hence it required the *oblivion* of the past, as it distracted *life* from creating the new. Leaders of the Soviet state had similar opinions, and for this reason they struggled against relics of the past and even forbade in the mid-twenties of the 20th century teaching of history at school and faculties of history in higher schools. Both were rehabilitated only ten years later, apparently for the same reasons that guided Nietzsche, who acknowledged that cognition of the past which was the product of *life* itself, could be used as a mean to achieve 3 of its goals in the form of 3 types of history, though under strict control over them. Firstly, *monumental* history can give *motivation for imitation and development*. Secondly, *antiquarian* history – due to the veneration of the past – helps to *preserve life*. Thirdly, *critical history* is useful as it helps to break the bonds of the past and *destroys it in order to be able to live further*.

Apparently, after Nietzsche nothing new was said about history as a useful *mean*. Obviously, since then the area of exploiting history has considerably broadened. There emerged subject areas for which reconstruction of the old and recent past (for instance, polls that became history

immediately after holding them) serves the basis for creating various sociologic, economic and historiosophic concepts. But *history* as knowledge about the past represents for many people not a mean, but a *purpose*, the achievement of which justifies their efforts. This fact makes it possible to raise an issue of the *meaning* of historical cognition. Maybe, the answer to this question will help to understand why *history* is necessary for historians and for us, its readers who are not going to use it in political or any other practical purposes.

The problem of the *meaning of history* is not a matter of the goal towards achievement of which the mankind moves consciously or unconsciously. First of all, it is a question of the meanings of the word *history*, but also of the *meaning* of historical cognition, that is the *goal* that makes historians look in the past for unknown events or to present in a new way the well-known ones. The term *the meaning of history* implies clarification of the *purpose* of those who together with historians investigate the events of bygone times. In spite of the likeness of the goals of historians and their readers and listeners, they are still different.

In the Russian language the word *meaning* in logical-semantic analysis of judgments is used as the synonym of the term *sense*. But when it's about the *meaning of the act* or the *meaning of life*, this word is used as a *purpose* of the act committed in the first case, and a *thought* inseparably associated with our life in the second case. It supports our determination to live further with clear understanding of the fact that death is inevitable. *The purpose of an act* is not the same with different people; it is hidden from the others and is not always clear to the one who commits the act; but if it is clear, the *meaning* of the act equals *motive*. At most the *meaning of life* is not clear to a human being. And these two elements – meaning and life – are knitted together so strongly, that efforts to treat meaning separately,

to make it distinct are successful extremely rarely. Most commonly, the *purpose* of one's own *life* is found out when it is achieved or when we're disappointed in it, as well as when we understand that it is impossible to achieve it. And then life that becomes *useless* finishes, unless we find immediately a decent alternative to the previous *meaning*.

The word *history* as well as its analogues deriving from the Greek “*historia*”, has two main meanings in all the European languages. *The first*, and, as many believe, the most important one, is the events of the past. *The second* important meaning of the word *history* is description of the events of the past, in most cases a scientific one. All other ways of using this word are variations of the two most important ones. For instance, various *common life stories* representing events of private life of the recent past, translated verbally by a storyteller who regards them indicative. The memory of them is not reliable and durable unless it is documented in writing or in printed format – in the form of *historical anecdotes* which characters are celebrities of their time, who, due to their extraordinary acts really or supposedly influenced their *contemporary* life and thus, influenced further *history*.

Common life stories include scandalous *stories*, in which, according to N.V. Gogol, Nozdryov, whom the writer, for this reason, called *the story man*, landed permanently. Using the word *story* to denote a scandal is absolutely justified, at least in Russian. Scandal is an event of the past, though recent (and therefore, it becomes *history* in the first meaning of the word), that became public due to its personal touch, and consequently became one of the *stories* (the second meaning), that are told and discussed for some time.

And what is strange: if nobody speaks about the scandal, thus, making its historical description that becomes public, then there is no scandal.

Scandalous event that is usually perceived as an out of the ordinary breach of decency, in itself does not make the event a scandal. *Stories* that should be avoided to be shared, that are scandalous events of the past, become such as soon as they are spoken about, become public due to their *historical reconstruction* that became known to close, remote or even unfamiliar people. No publicity, no scandal, no *story* – such was the fact that another Gogol's character – lieutenant Pirogov from “Nevsky Prospekt”, who first got into a huff and then forgot the humiliation, stated with pleasure.

But isn't it the same with all the events of the past that are described by multiple *scientific histories* – political, social and cultural ones? We do not know anything about those events apart from what is said about them by the corresponding *histories*, as if without them the events of the past would not happen at all. But why *as if*? They *do not exist* in the real life: they disappeared in the old or recent past. They only *exist* in the form of historical reconstructions, which solely make them *interconnected* with *existence* (in other words, make them *events*). That is why the same word *history* means both events of the past, and their description. But did those events of the past happen and did they happen in such a way that they were described by the *historical reconstructions*? The solution of these problems depends on the mastership of historians and on many other factors influencing the perception of their research by contemporaries and descendants. Nobody managed to compare an irretrievably disappeared event with its description.

There are several more science disciplines in which their names and subject matters coincide partly or totally, for instance, *geography* and *geology*. Their subject matters are single objects – the Earth surface in the first example and its internal structure in the second example. Single objects are also subjects of historical reconstructions, though

their singularity is not determined by the unique character of the researched object, but, according to new Kantians V. Windelbandt and H. Rickert, by a specific method, requiring from historians to describe a rather ordinary (from the point of view of the natural science method, unifying its objects) event as a unique one, having its own feature, different from anyone or anything else. According to them, there were two methods that formed in us two different images of reality: one of them was the world of *nature* that excluded anything radically different from another, but put everything under control of perpetual and permanent laws; and *cultural and historical* world where everything was single and unique. In the world of *history*, according to O. Spengler, who emphasized the uniqueness of the events that it describes, they use ordinal numbers, banning to change places of summands, making – when added up – a historical date, which, however, was easily allowed for cardinal numbers, creating the foundation of the image of perpetual *nature* repeating itself.

One can argue the fact that the opposition *nature-history* determines the horizon of thinking of any people in any time. However, it is difficult to argue that for a historian there is no more honorable task and more joyful result than to discover in everyday life routine of the past an outstanding event that is either completely unknown to the most of his contemporaries, which for this reason was not described by anyone, or a radical change in its image that was formed by the previous descriptions. An unmatched, unique, singular, whether it is an act of a single person or a movement of big masses of people, legal system of a disappeared state or a religious cult of a small tribe, scientific mentality of a certain era or its predominant prejudices – all these and many more that have certain influence, are interesting both for historians and us, their readers and listeners.

The unique character of the events of the past reconstructed by historians predetermines their isolation from each other and presence of the gaps between them, which makes it possible for social and political scientists, science and religion theorists to advance various speculations about the reasons of those events and their consequences, about orientation of historical process and its driving forces. It happens that historians build such hypotheses themselves, abandoning subject matter of their science – singular and unique. Becoming *quasi*-politologists, *quasi*-sociologists, *quasi*-science theorists etc., they see in reconstructions not the final *purpose* of historical studies, not their *meaning*, but only an intermediate stage, a useful *mean* to achieve another higher purpose, for example, to illustrate and verify philosophical anthropology, social or any other summarizing theory, using historical facts.

Verification capacities of the so-called *historical facts* in humanology and social science are not less not more than empirical data in natural sciences. The goal and the limits of verification capacities in natural sciences consist in *delimitation* of the scientific language as compared to the other languages. *Facts* of history are considered by authors of sociological, political, economic, anthropologic and other similar theories as analogues of the *empirical data* in natural sciences, collected to persuade the readers in their correctness. Not in the verity, but on a bigger level of verification than that of other competing authors, and therefore, with a more scientific approach of their own theories. But historical description of a single event is not *empirical* and moreover, is not a *fact*, but the result of historian's conclusions about something that does not exist any longer, and possibly, has never existed. Certainly, the reference to historical reconstructions verifies scientific scrupulosity of the authors of theories,

who studied a variety of statements about the past and the present eluding in this past, but in no way their verity and correctness in arguments with competitors. The past which is known to us is a starting point for humanitarian and social science concepts. It is a summation of historians' thoughts about the unique events that are interlinked and interconnected only by a chronological sequence that does not necessarily mean that the preceding event caused the following one.

The world of history is a world of purposes, where every preceding event does not necessarily cause the following acts of people, but only the ones that came in field of their view. But even in this case such an event is not a reason inevitably causing certain acts, but a cause of completely different acts. Summer rain is not the reason, but a cause: to come into the shop for certain people; to show out a new umbrella for the others; to jump across warm puddles for children, etc. A *cause* is a preceding event, which passed through the prism of human purposes. As for the motive, it represents a justification of an act initiated by the cause of an act, a proof of a person to him/herself of the meaningfulness of his/her acts, of their rational viability. However, a human being, *Homo sapiens*, is reasonable only in part. When a person shapes goals, this process is influenced not only by a person's mind, but also by a person's passions (affects) that a person controls only to a certain extent, and which occasionally make a person plunge into adventures. And because of irrational origin of a person's own purposes he/she cannot always explain their *meaning*.

Is a historian capable of identifying all these purposes without the knowledge of what reconstructions of the events of the past will not be comprehensive and veracious? What is interesting and useful there for us in stating single, inimitable and not quite reasonable acts of historical personalities? Do we care whether Aleksandr Menshikov was a descendant of Polish

nobles, as he assured himself, or a plebian, as his enemies said? What can the accurate knowledge of his origin give us? How can this knowledge about the person who lived 300 years ago serve us after his death? The answer is known for a long time: *history teaches only the fact that it cannot teach anything*. But historians are not embarrassed by the *uselessness* of their work for those who want to use their reconstructions as a mean to achieve their own practical purposes. No reasons turn them away from their favorite activity – retrieving single events from the dark of the past. What moves them apart from the cult of *love of knowledge* for knowledge sake, typical for European science? Is it really a matter of love of laurels and glory? What is the *meaning* of historical studies? What real objective do they pursue? What is the reason of historians' and their readers' curiosity for the purposes that caused actions of the people who disappeared long ago, or at least for the motives justifying their actions?

A historical reconstruction has to describe real events, and not fantasies of their authors. L. Ranke and his great followers J.G. Droysen and J. Burckhardt, working in the 19th century on terms of validity of historical essays, made the conclusion that all the single events of the past cannot be their objects, but only those that can be reconstructed on the basis of the written sources. All other evidences of the past are either *prehistoric* or *unhistorical*. The elaboration of the concept of *historical* made it possible to draw a line between scientific *history* and the myths, legends and common life stories, on the one hand, but also sciences about the past that were actively formed in the 19th century, such as *paleontology and archeology*, on the other hand. A written source requires critical reading and comparison with other written documents, as their direct or indirect evidences of the events are conditioned with personal purposes and motives of their

authors, often hidden by them, but occasionally non-conscious. It turned out that without studying the motives of both participants of the events, and the authors of such evidences, a reliable historical reconstruction is not possible.

Without regarding real opportunities that emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries due to multiple techniques of *understanding* the motives that guided people of other disappeared cultures, let us ask ourselves a question about the *meaning* of such understanding. What does it give to the historians? What does it give to us, the readers? Do we really care which motives guided a historical character when he/she committed the actions? It is widely thought that *history* does not have subjunctive mood, and thus, it is useless to ask such questions as: what would happen under different circumstances. Historians should speak exclusively about something that really happened, and not about something that could have happened. The event of the past has no alternatives. And no one can know this. It is such an obstacle for fantasies and speculations that nobody can *avoid* or overcome in any other way. It is thought that the *meaning of history*, its main mission and its purpose consist in coming to know such *necessities*.

However, the action, which is becoming the past and thus, becoming a *necessary* event, still isn't becoming *inevitable*. It could be different. And we know that. Still, we do not know what it could have been. But people who became historical characters due to the writings of researchers of the past knew that they could have acted in a different way, not in the way that they acted. They knew that in the given circumstances they were free enough to choose a different goal and different means to achieve it. But the important thing they did not know was a distant consequence of their free choice. Instead, it is known to their descendants, who are able to *judge*, whether their ancestors were right

or wrong in their choice, and whether their acts made or did not make an irreparable harm to the following generations.

Ancestors are defendants of the descendants. Every new generation makes its own *judgment of history*. And historians and readers of their reconstructions play different roles in this judgment. Some historians stand for prosecution, others – for defense. The first reconstruct the event due to different evidences and proofs, trying to prove the malicious intent of a historical character or his/her criminal negligence. Historians-lawyers on the same or newly discovered grounds draw the picture of the same event, which, however, demonstrates the lack of criminal intents (and it is known that without them there is no crime). Instead, they depict careful precaution and good cause for descendants of the act committed by the defendant historical character or the group of people.

Two images of the event are taken to our judgment, judgment of the readers of historical works who deliver a verdict, which, however, will never be unanimous and definitive. And it means, that historians' work will never stop, and its *meaning* consists in the fact that both they are and we are, their readers, respond to the last silent (and sometimes written in the memoirs) request of the ancestors to study thoroughly all the circumstances preceding and accompanying their actions, including their motives. We are, the readers, playing the role of the jury of our generation, make judgments on those who are gone. It is impossible for us not to judge them. Like they did in their own time, we are afraid of the *judgment of history*, and we yearn it, as we know: there is no worst punishment both for us and for them, than oblivion by the indifferent descendants who are not able and not even willing to see the *difference* between our *face* and someone else's. Let there be eternal damnation according to the verdict of the *Last Judgment*, let

there be damnation of the descendants pronounced by the *judgment of history*, but not the complete disappearance of my Self in the dehumanizing darkness of the past, thinks Ibsen's Peer Gynt. And this approach is shared by all those who grew up under the influence of Jewish, Christian and Islamic cults.

Buddhists, for example, do not aspire that. For them isolated existence, even in paradise, is not the *meaning* of life, but a punishment. The aim of a Buddhist, making his life meaningful is different – to stop reincarnations and to get rid of the isolation by dissolving in Nirvana with the whole world. Therefore, Buddhism has no interest for *history* which values only single events and accuses or defends ancestors. There is no *history* in Hinduism either. It is absent in all the religions. Instead, there are myths – stories that set examples of *right and wrong* acts in the form of *common life stories*. Occasionally myths include details of the past documented in other sources. However, the *meaning* of myths is not to establish whether any of the inimitable events of the past took place, whether they happened in a certain place at a certain time. Their task is to encourage a person to reproduce on a permanent basis the norms of behavior approved by religions and to prevent something that is not approved. Religious *stories* are always *useful*: they are *used* as *means* to achieve certain *unhistorical* purposes, but they are never regarded as a final goal in itself. Historians have nothing to do with myths. The most efficient way of delivering them was and remains an oral and ideally cadenced narration of the *stories*. And most important, the judgment of their characters was already made, and the final verdict was delivered not by the humans, and for this reason cannot be contested.

In ancient and medieval China and other countries of the Far East and South-East with influential Chinese traditions that have not disappeared completely by now the education

was basically *historical*. An applicant became a *student*, and for a long time thoroughly studied certain approved essay, which exposed the *history* of ruling class by the famous administrators of a certain rank or victories of the commanders. Teaching was based on a precedent that guided officials and military commanders in case of similar situations. The interest for the past here, as well as in myths, is absolutely practical, and therefore excludes the concept of *history*, as studies of inimitable events of the past are valuable in themselves.

European historians who thought that the *meaning* of their activity was to serve the *judgment of history* in the process of hearing the arguments of the parties, create more and more detailed images of the events of the past that have already influenced their contemporary life, and in terms of distant and not always apparent consequences influenced our lives as well. What do these ghosts of the past that revived in historical reconstructions do amongst us? Do they influence us again? What does this influence consist in? Is it possible to use purposefully these ghost images whose power after taking them out of the dark of oblivion may surpass their former strength? We should be careful when dealing with them.

Let's remember Renaissance era with unprecedented immorality of its giants and with further cataclysms starting with an innocent, at first sight, liquidation of *white spots* in history. The most important of them were establishing the forgery of Donation of Constantine and translation of the Bible into different languages. Let us also remember the ghosts that became apparent in *white spots* of history of the USSR and the CPSU that escaped from the arms of those who initiated *perestroika*. Those ghosts were supposed to be used for the sake of *acceleration* and *democratization* and largely contributed to the crash of the USSR, the CPSU and the whole global socialist system.

The efficiency of historical reconstructions may be extremely high, and its consequences may be even darker than the grave dark of the past. The future that comes as the result of our decisions is different from the one that is propelled by the *laws of nature*. Halley's Comet will always approach Earth with regular periodicity. And we *know* when it happens next time. Unless the mankind invents new means capable of changing the orbit of notorious comet for its own purposes. The future caused by our free acts, including historical reconstructions, is not predictable, but is just assumed. It is impossible to know it. We may only *believe* in it, believe that our acts that we may commit or not commit will bring us to the expected purpose. The duty of historians is to remember about that. Similarly to the medieval alchemists who wanted to change the *nature of things* (celestial, according to them) and to cleanse their souls from all the sinful thoughts before they start their *mighty works*, historians should cleanse from temptation to serve self-seeking interests of one or another political party, of one or another theory, promising the knowledge of human existence laws or *causa finalis* of historical process. Historians have a more important and honorable task – to encourage the *judgment of history*, disclosing minor circumstances of the studied matters, including reasonable motives of defendants and their unreasonable purposes. These studies represent a response to the plea of those who are gone to arbitrate them. They constitute the *meaning* of historical science, its *goal* that its servants do not always realize. We should remember that the phrase *truth is born in arguments* appeared in *dicasteries* (civil courts) of ancient Greece, where disinterested *dikasts* (judges, and earlier – fair people who shared trophy and community lands) facilitated hearing the arguments of the parties in order to find *aletheia* (truth), thoroughly hidden from the

others, and sometimes hidden from themselves. The expression *scientific discovery* dates back from that time.

But historians are human beings, and nothing human is strange to them, including irrational passions making some people to support the position of accusation and the others to play for the defense team. Affection and antipathy do not emerge in mind which cannot always control the acts, but are caused by passions. Is the question: “whether historians’ preferences prevent impartial investigation of the events that they are interested in” appropriate? No, it is not. Only voluntary fakers of history are always reasonable and cold-blooded, and they mercenarily tempt politicians with their useful goods. Without passionate attitude to their work, without love for truth, its scrupulous studies are not possible. C. Helvetius once said that *dispassion* is a sign of *imbecility*. And F. Stegun, explaining exposure by O. Spengler of the finest shades of *‘Apollo’s soul’* with his love for ancient Greece, wrote that *love* does not make the enamored person blind, but on the contrary, makes it possible to see in the object

of his/her affection something, that indifference could never see there. However, disaffection also adds to the sight of the person who hates, who looks for and, most importantly, finds in the object of his/her dislike signs of ugliness, that he/she does not notice or easily forgives in close people or in those he likes, or even in strange and unknown people.

Readers of the historical essays, jury of the *judgment of history* – are not dispassionate either. They love, they hate, and therefore they will never let the proceedings stop, as they will never be unanimous in pronouncing a sentence to their ancestors. As for the latter, they will not allow it either, as, in compliance with the unvoiced pact of the parties, they have a right of calling on the judgment of the new generations of indifferent descendants. And so it will continue till the end of time, if this end happens, but in this case, *history* in both meanings of this word will lose any *meaning*, and will stop its existence. And nobody will care about the genuine authorship of Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets, or whether Lenin was a German spy.

¹ The word *theōria* means *observation, contemplation*. Ancient Hellenes divided it into sensuous and *speculation*.

О смысле истории

Г.В. Болдыгин

*Гуманитарный университет
Россия 620049, Екатеринбург, ул. Студенческая, 19*

Статья посвящена исследованию цели исторического познания, которое автор по аналогии со «смыслом жизни» называет «смыслом истории». Этой целью не может быть мысль об истории как средстве, полезном для неисторических целей. Смысл истории в установлении истины и участии в интеллектуальном процессе, который называется «суд истории».

Ключевые слова: смысл, история, суд истории, необходимость и неизбежность, историческая реконструкция, цель, мотив.
