

The Paths of History

Tracing an outline of historical processes from palaeolithic times to the present day, *The Paths of History* provides a unique, concise and readable overview of the entire history of humanity and the laws governing it. This is a broad and ambitious study which takes as its point of departure Marx's theory of social evolution. Professor Diakonoff, however, has expanded Marx's five stages of development to eight. In addition, and in contrast to Marx, Professor Diakonoff denies that our transition from one stage to the next is marked by social conflict and revolution and demonstrates that these transitions are sometimes achieved peacefully and gracefully. Professor Diakonoff's focus is not limited solely to the economic and socio-economic aspects of our development, rather he examines in detail the ethnic, cultural, religious and military-technological factors which have been brought to bear over the centuries. Professor Diakonoff also denies that social evolution necessarily implies progress and shows how 'each progress is simultaneously a regress'. Finally the book concludes with a prognosis for the future of humanity, leaving the reader to draw their own conclusion about what the future holds. As the book moves through the various chronological stages, the reader is drawn into a remarkable and thought-provoking study of the process of the history of the human race which promises to be the most important work of intellectual world history since Toynbee.

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Foreword by Geoffrey Hoskins

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the ending of the Marxist monopoly on intellectual life freed Russian social scientists and historians to deploy a broader range of theoretical approaches to the history of their own country and the world. When one couples this renewed freedom with the very distinctive personal experience of those who have lived through the Soviet experiment, the results are sometimes remarkable. *The Paths of History* is one of the most intriguing and innovative fruits of this intellectual and spiritual milieu.

Its author, Igor Mikhailovich Diakonoff, was born on 12 January 1915 in Petrograd, the son of a bank employee. His father had enough experience of finance and banking to be sent as an employee to the Commercial Department of the Soviet embassy in Christiania (Oslo). Thus Igor received his primary education at a Norwegian school, and learned to speak Norwegian fluently, the first of the many languages which he displayed a remarkable ability and desire to learn in later life. (At the age of seventy-three he confessed to a colleague who was learning modern Greek: 'I'm always jealous of someone who knows a language I don't!') His highly unusual linguistic range has enabled him to penetrate the mentality of many different cultures, and this undoubtedly underlies the wide sweep of human sympathy evident in *The Paths of History*. One of his acquisitions was English, which he knows so well that he has translated some of the works of Keats and Tennyson, and was able to prepare this translation of *The Paths of History* largely himself.

After returning to the Soviet Union and matriculating in 1930 from a secondary school in Leningrad, he studied in the Assyriological Section of the History Faculty in the Leningrad Institute of Linguistics and History, mastering Akkadian, Sumerian, Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic. Following graduation, he worked in the Hermitage Museum, with its unique collection of Oriental and Middle Eastern artefacts.

He married in 1936, but the following year both his father and his wife's father were arrested. After 'learning the art of standing in prison queues', Igor was informed that his own father had been 'sentenced to ten years' imprisonment without right of correspondence' – a sentence which he rightly interpreted as execution by firing squad.

When the war came, his wife Nina, who was pregnant, was evacuated from Leningrad to Tashkent, while Igor was mobilised into military intelligence. He

worked in Karelia, preparing propaganda material for distribution among the enemy. Then, in 1944, he was sent to Kirkenes, in Finnmark, at the northern extremity of Norway, which was temporarily occupied by the Red Army as the Germans retreated. Speaking fluent Norwegian, he was made deputy commandant of the occupied zone. He admired Norwegian democracy and loved the Norwegian people, and so became an invaluable mediator between the occupiers and the population. He was so much valued by them that in 1994 he and Nina were invited to Oslo to a fiftieth anniversary celebration of the liberation from the Germans, was formally presented with the thanks of the Norwegian people and was received by the King as a guest of honour.

Demobilised in 1946, he returned to the Hermitage and later worked at the Oriental Institute of the Academy of Sciences for most of the rest of his professional life. There were very few oriental specialists in the Soviet Union when he started work there, and he played a major role in building up the Institute. However, he also managed to publish a major series of scholarly works on the languages, cultures, socio-economic systems and histories of, among others, Assyria, the Hittite kingdom, Babylon, Parthia and Armenia. The climax of his scholarly career was the publication in 1989 of a three-volume *History of the Ancient World*, of which he was the principal editor.

Having brought out this *magnum opus* in his mid-seventies, Diakonoff might have been expected to relax from his lifelong endeavours. On the contrary, he resolved on the opposite course – to embark on his most ambitious project yet, an outline of world mythology. It so happened that a team which he and several colleagues had assembled to compile a comparative dictionary of Afro-Asian languages fell apart, undoing several years' work. In a recent letter to me, Diakonov wrote that 'For a long while I was deeply frustrated by this. But the large amount of material collected by our group led me to some inferences on the mentality of ancient man, who expressed his understanding of the world and his feelings toward it in the only way available to him, namely in myths.'

The outcome of these reflections was his *Archaic Myths of Orient and Occident* (Göteborg, 1993). This work in its turn stimulated him to attempt something even more wide-ranging, a universal history in which socio-psychological factors would occupy a far more dominant position than was normal in Marxist and even post-Marxist accounts. As early as 1983 he had delivered a theoretical paper to the Oriental Institute on the importance of socio-psychological factors in history, tacitly casting doubt on the primary role which Marxists attribute to material factors. Having learnt in his earlier work to give close attention to myth, religion, science and philosophy, he believed he observed certain regularities at work in the spiritual as well as material evolution of the world's earliest civilisations, those of the Middle East. He set out to discover if similar regularities could be discerned in others parts of the world and at other times. He came to the conclusion that they could.

The result is the present book. Diakonoff's point of departure is the theory of social evolution as elaborated by Marx and Engels. However, he has introduced some changes of cardinal importance, which impart to the theory both greater flexibility and greater explanatory power. In the first place, he has expanded Marx's five stages of social evolution (primitive; slave-owning; feudal; bourgeois capitalist; socialist) to eight (Primitive; Primitive-Communal; Early or Communal Antiquity; Late or Imperial Antiquity; Middle Ages; Absolutist Post-Middle Ages; Capitalism; Post-Capitalism). He denies that the transition from one stage to another is necessarily marked by heightened social conflict and revolution: on the contrary, he asserts, it is sometimes accomplished peacefully and gradually. The conflict which does take place is not only between the forces of production and the social relationships surrounding them, but much more broadly between religious, ethnic and other socio-psychological formations. (Though, it should be noted, Diakonoff denies the overriding importance which the late-twentieth-century Russian theorist Lev Gumilev ascribes to ethnic factors.)

Altogether Diakonoff is much more interested in ethnic, cultural and religious factors than Marx was, and also in military technology. He ascribes to them not just the residual significance of an airy and derivative superstructure over a substantial and primary base, but sees them as independent and powerful influences in themselves.

He denies that social evolution necessarily implies progress, other than in the narrowly technological sense. Rather, he sees humanity as developing simultaneously in two contradictory directions: 'each progress is simultaneously a regress'. On the one hand humans attain greater technological mastery, mounting prosperity and mutual tolerance and they move towards the gradual elimination of war through the mediation of international institutions; but at the same time they also generate unrestrained population growth, ethnic cleansing, exhaustion of resources and gross degradation of the environment, while those wars which do occur are unprecedentedly destructive. Diakonoff declines to say which tendency he thinks is likely to take the upper hand, but in his exposition the idea of the 'end of history' has a very different ring from the one evoked by Francis Fukuyama in his book *The End of History and the Last Man*.

What makes Diakonoff's book so remarkable is both the wide sweep of its learning and the humanity of its insights. Few if any theorists of world history before him have been experts on ancient Asian and Middle Eastern societies, so that his chapters on Primitive Society, Antiquity and the Middle Ages are written with a penetration, sympathy and awareness of diverse possibilities which none of his rivals can match. At the same time his personal experience of war and political terror, but also of the attempts since World War II to create greater confidence and better relations between nations, have deepened his insights, instilling in them both a profound concern about the fate of humanity and also an ambivalent attitude towards its future.

There have of course been other post-Marxist theorists of world history, such as Perry Anderson¹ and Immanuel Wallerstein,² but none of them has Diakonoff's depth of personal insight, nor have they emancipated themselves so fully from Marx. As for the non-Marxist theorists, they do not usually offer such a detailed and elaborate periodisation of social evolution as Diakonoff. Ernest Gellner,³ for example, whose work has similar range and penetration, operates with a relatively simple scheme of 'agrarian', 'industrial' and 'post-industrial' societies. Michael Mann⁴ ascribes as much importance as Diakonoff does to military, religious and cultural factors, but devotes less attention to ancient society, while overall his theory is more diffuse, perhaps more all-embracing, but also less easy to apply to individual instances.

Diakonoff's book, then, occupies its own distinctive and very valuable position in the relatively small repertoire of works which offer a theory, rather than just a narrative account, of universal history. Indeed, it could be asserted that it sets out the most clearly argued and convincingly elaborated periodisation of human societies currently to be found in the scholarly literature. It is certain that its propositions will be keenly debated and that its ideas will inspire historians and sociologists to fruitful comparison, in whatever period or region they are working.

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1. *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, London: NLB, 1974; *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, London: Verso, 1978.
2. *The Modern World System*, 3 vols., New York: Academic Press, 1974–1989.
3. *Plough, Sword and Book: The Structure of Human History*, London: Collins Harvill, 1988.
4. *The Sources of Social Power*, 2 vols., Cambridge University Press, 1986–1993.

Preface

Throughout my life I have studied the socio-economic history of the Ancient World, and in recent years its social psychology as well. At last I arrived at a concept of how the historical process worked – at least in the period from Palaeolithic times to the end of Antiquity. It seemed to me that during this period the process consisted not of two phases as is assumed in Marxist historiography but of four regular stages of world-wide valence. The probable mechanism of change also seemed clear.

Then I asked myself whether this concept of the mechanism responsible for phase change could be applied to the later history of mankind. Although not an expert in the history of Middle Ages and the modern period, I tried nevertheless to trace an outline of the historical process during these phases, drawing on the work of a variety of authors. It appeared to me that the historical process after Antiquity could be subdivided into four more phases, each with its own mechanism of emergence and function. . . . The result was a short overview of the whole history of mankind, and of the laws governing it – not only economic and socio-economic laws but also socio-psychological ones.

For this overview of world history (perhaps too hastily conceived by me) I am solely responsible. A detailed account of my views as regards the first four phases can be found in my earlier published, less ambitious, work on more specific subjects. As regards the later phases, I have omitted all references in order not to make any of my colleagues answerable for my own, possibly faulty, conclusions.

In an earlier generation, H. G. Wells, who was not even a historian by training, offered an outline of the entire history of mankind. His efforts had some success, at least with the general public, I hope therefore, that this book too – written as it is by a specialist, at least as regards a certain part of world history – may be of some interest, and not only for professionals, but also for the general reader who is interested in history and has some elementary knowledge in the field. The historical periods and episodes which the existing handbooks expound in sufficient detail have been treated summarily, but those which usually are not to be found in popular handbooks on history, or which I felt to be especially interesting, are presented at greater length.

For inevitable minor – or perhaps even more serious – mistakes and omissions, I beg the readers' indulgence.