

Dmitri Nikulin. *The Concept of History*. Bloomsbury Academic 2017. 248 pp. \$120.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781474269117); \$39.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781350064898).

Attention to the concept of history increases in inverse proportion to its intelligibility. Barely legible, the less rational and orderly events appear, the more they mutate beyond the bounds of human anticipation, the more the intellect strives to comprehend them. The conceptual apparatus of the humanities, dominated by history, is set into motion: tracing origins, establishing contexts, discerning processes, etc. Facing an unknown future, scholarly focus on what came before seems second-nature, central to the shared conviction that historicizing can produce adequate insight into the continuity taken to exist in human history. The production of every conceivable sort of history, on every conceivable type of object, progresses apace. Yet the unmanageable heterogeneity and incoherence of object, intention and interpretation leaves the credibility of historical knowledge more and more in doubt.

Unsurprisingly, however, *The Concept of History* admits of no fundamental mismatch between historical comprehension and the circumstances of immediate existence, since this would be to admit the inadequacy of historical knowledge in a world where history dominates: to question what connection it really has to human flourishing; to wonder why a world so thoroughly historicized, so historically overdetermined, has turned out the way it has. Instead, accepting the necessity of historical sentience at face value, this volume is a reaffirmation of some established ways of thinking. It reduces to a philosophically useful and undeniably sophisticated contribution which comes to some conventional conclusions. Posing well-worn questions and supplying equally weathered answers, it is a missed opportunity to shed some incisive light on an important topic. Although it might prove of use to the interested history or philosophy undergraduate, as well as to more advanced scholars in these or related fields, it is difficult to identify where it breaks new ground.

To begin with, asking what history is could hardly constitute a more unexceptional question. Notoriously imprecise, the concept can accommodate all manner of incompatible interpretations. Focusing on it by reference to the ways in which the concept has been historically used or taken to mean distracts reflection from the immediate circumstances in which historical knowledge, and what Martin L. Davies calls ‘history-focused behaviour,’ are complicit. Still, through a series of historically-orientated chapters Nikulin puts forward the now common view (at least in academia) that historical events contain no inner logic unfolding purposefully towards an objective immanent to them. Unverifiable, the old idea that there exists any universal point, purpose or plan in history apart from those projected upon it remains as wishful as it ever was. Rather, uncontroversially foregoing a universally applicable narrative structure, a unifying History, Nikulin contends historical writing is about the preservation, transmission, and projection of human action and self-knowledge: i.e. who we are, is our history. Therefore, generally construed, ‘history’ (what happened/happens) is what human beings do; conversely, what human beings do, is history. *Making* history requires human action; *knowing* history requires its representation. So, in a different, additional sense, history (knowledge of what happened/happens) comprises the *post factum* conceptualization, reckoning, or rationalization of what human beings did and why, where, how and when, represented either orally or in writing. This—the point of historical knowledge, explanation, narrative—makes historical events make sense.

Echoing Herodotus, Nikulin locates in this construction of historical accounts the human subject’s ontological imperative to persist, to continue in some temporal form: ‘The necessity of the historical lies in the ontological need for the overcoming of non-being, for preserving oneself in

being, which is the historical being that is retained, mentioned, and remembered in a history' (13). Taking his cue from the early Greek historians Hecataeus and Hellanicus, he adopts a pluralistic view of historical enquiry that embraces a potentially limitless proliferation of histories coexisting together, illuminating different aspects of past phenomena from a range of dissimilar perspectives, for 'a history may be about anything' (54). In discussing the structure of historical narratives, he draws a useful distinction between the story or *fabula* it invariably offers, e.g., 'the French Revolution took place in Paris in 1789,' and the requisite dimension of detail fleshing it out ('the historical') which includes names, 'things and events' supportive of the story told (12-13).

Certainly, this picture of history is plausible. Far from disclosing any directional, univocal process or hidden 'plan of nature' (as Kant hoped), the investigation of human affairs instead admits of an unlimited array of incompatible views concerning their character, let alone purpose. In a global *milieu* of increasingly amplified technological potential constantly thwarting human self-comprehension and endangering human existence (through biosphere degradation, antimicrobial resistance, global warming, biogenetic research, etc.) any extant or imagined epistemological coherence or progressive historical ethos is subsumed into a scattershot, self-compromising chronology of chaos, which must deal increasingly in historical disjunction, dissymmetry, discrepancy and dissolution.

But the question then becomes: what enlightenment does adding to the already colossal surplus of historical data purchase us? Nikulin doesn't say. He merely asserts that 'history allows us not to overcome our finitude but rather to suspend it... we become capable of living on in a history precisely as historical beings—after our physical existence comes to an end.' Yet what if one had no desire to 'live on' whatsoever? There may well exist a biological imperative to survive, but there's no rule of nature that demands we must hope to be 'secured' or 'kept within' the confines of 'historical being' thereafter. Indeed, who decides in what form and for what purpose this 'living on' may take? Presumably, the nature of this 'continued historical existence' will be ascertained by the historians of the future, though what competence or vested interests they may or may not have remains unknown (173). Hardly uplifting, this sounds merely sinister. Moreover, 'oblivion' is only 'futile' if one assumes the 'non-being of forgetfulness' is harmful, although it needn't seem so, and Nikulin makes no effort to substantiate the claim (173). 'History', he insists peculiarly, 'gives us life as (historical) being' (174). What sort of life, or unspecified half-life (historical accounts don't last forever, and most people are not actually written about at all) would this entail? Once dead, it could be of no consequence or value to me personally what form my 'historical being' might take, so it certainly doesn't sound much like a 'life' in the ordinary sense of the word.

Nikulin concludes with the obligatory claim—apparently to reiterate history's relevance—that 'history is not just about the past: it is about the past for the sake of the present' (174). For the sake of precisely *what* in the present, and for *whom* in particular? What political, ethical, and ideological work is all this history doing in the world? Palming off the comforting (?) suggestion that 'being in history means living in a history, in the memory of those who share and themselves live in and off that history' sidesteps such questions, portraying history as a soothing balm with preservative effects—rather like the embalming fluids used to prevent corporeal decomposition, to give a sanitized, disinfected impression of the deceased (173-174). But the idea that history is something one 'inhabits' or 'lives off' is a domineering, invidious one. Actually, 'you don't live a history, you live a life,' as Keith Jenkins recently informed me. In assuming 'historical being' is something elemental, desirable, natural, Nikulin ignores the issue of how the idea of living 'in and off' history has played out in the world. Not the lifeless, spectral world of 'historical being' in which one is suspended like a comatose ghost in a story of someone else's making, but the world of actual experience. In this world, regrettably, history has a hucksterish penchant for taking people in, providing for them ample

ammunition—the grievances, the resentments, the feverish dreams— with which to condemn and persecute others. But what the historicized mind in addition displays is an inability to distinguish what, in the world’s vast, contradictory history, is relevant for living one’s life. This is a lamentable dilemma nowhere mentioned here.

The book ends on a perfunctory note: ‘Since history is not one monolithic universal and teleological history, it should allow for a coexisting *plurality* of histories, so that we always participate and live in several histories at the same time’ (173). Nothing new here, since this focus on difference, indeterminacy of value, and narrative open-endedness coincides with current intellectual fashions in the humanities. But again, how does one know *which* history, if any, truly pertains to one’s life? Appealing to history to tell you is self-defeating, circular. After all, Nikulin conceives of historical narration as (what else?) always multiple, provisional, ephemeral—i.e., quickly outdated. Hence, how tenuous the routinely alleged link or concord between life and history really is emerges in the book’s lack of specificity. Indiscriminate, history’s heterogeneity, evinced in the vagueness of participating and living ‘in several histories at once,’ fosters only uncertainty. Although the concept of history alludes to an object of enquiry amorphous, changing, contingent, the ability to impose narrative order upon it here produces a self-contented academic response unaware of its futility. Its own verdict disqualifies history’s oft-alleged capacity to guide human existence and secure human being—let alone beyond the grave.

Alexandre Leskanich, Royal Holloway College, University of London