Sovereign Nothingness: Pyotr Chaadaev's Political Theology

Kirill Chepurin and Alex Dubilet

Abstract This paper speculatively reconstructs the unique intervention that Pyotr Chaadaev, the early nineteenth-century Russian thinker, made into the political-theological debate. Instead of positioning sovereignty and exception against each other, Chaadaev seeks to think the (Russian) exception immanently, affirming its nonrelation to, and even nullity or nothingness vis-à-vis, the (European, Christian-modern) world-historical regime—and to theorize the logic of sovereignty that could arise *from within* this nullity. As a result, we argue, nothingness itself becomes, in Chaadaev, operative through and as the sovereign act and the figure of the sovereign, exemplified for him by the Russian emperor Peter the Great (1672–1725).

Ever since the interlaced exchanges between Walter Benjamin, Carl Schmitt, and Jacob Taubes, the discourse of political theology has been a space structured by a set of positions—and oppositions—around a set of concepts: nomos and anomia, justice and *katechon*, order and nothingness, sovereignty and exception.[1] For Schmitt, it was famously the modern sovereign who decided *on* the state of exception (to the law) so that a lawful order could be (re-)established. More recently, from Roberto Esposito and Giorgio Agamben to work in decolonial and Black studies, many have diagnosed and explored the structure of the constitutive exception at the heart of Western modernity—the way the law (of progress, providence, salvation, universal history, etc.) depends for its workings on that which it excludes, represses, exploits, and covers up.[2] From this perspective, sovereignty becomes the decision on such exclusions and serves to uphold the very power to exclude. If we recall also the discourse of the sovereign subject as specifically modern—grasped, for example, by Hans Blumenberg in the figure of the subject's self-assertion as the foundation of the modern scientific worldview and the modern idea of progress[3]—we can appreciate how fundamentally modernity depends on the conjunction of sovereignty, law, and exception. The question of modernity itself—the modern world *as* a structure of power and exclusion that we have

Theory & Event Vol. 22, No. 2, 243–266 © 2019 Johns Hopkins University Press

inherited—thus stands at the heart of political-theological discourse. Given that across the various inflections of political theology, sovereignty has been repeatedly seen as upholding order at the expense of the anomia indexed by the exception, an accompanying interest has emerged across contemporary theory: how to think the nonplace of exception *without* sovereignty, as ungrounding or fully disinvested from the work of the law (of history, humanity, or the world).

This paper speculatively reconstructs a unique intervention into this ongoing debate from within an early nineteenth-century Russian context—an intervention that likewise attempts to think the exception immanently, from within, affirming its full *nonrelation* to, and even *nullity* vis-à-vis, the Western, Christian-modern (world-historical) regime. However, instead of positioning exception and sovereignty against each other—whether by way of the latter deciding on and repressing the former, or the former absolutely refusing the latter—this intervention re-configures the logic of sovereignty itself, so that the sovereign act becomes an act of *un*covering and affirming the void of the exception as such (*as* the void—without tradition, history, or law). Nothingness itself, thought of as totally ungrounding the historical-whole, here becomes operative through and as the sovereign act and the figure of the sovereign.[4]

For Pyotr Chaadaev (1794–1856), the philosopher who, in the 1820s and '30s, offered the intervention that we here reconstruct, this was a way of thinking through—and then radically cutting—the Gordian knot of Russian political and national identity, which had by that time emerged in full force and which to this day looms over the country's relationship to the West. This knot—the irresolvable ambiguity underlying Russian identity—arose from the ambivalent status of being at once a European power and embodying the figure of an (often dangerous, semi-barbaric, threatening) Other; at once a cultural colony whose intellectual culture drew on resources mostly borrowed from the West starting at least from the eighteenth century, and whose elite tended to study in Europe and speak French more frequently than Russian—and the center of its own empire, which at Chaadaev's time rhetorically proclaimed its own tradition and its own religion to be competing with, and even superior to, the European ("in the joint spirit of Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality," as Russian Minister of Education Sergey Uvarov's 1833 programmatic formulation went). A country, then, which claimed to be a powerful, independent agent of history—but which, in the eyes of Chaadaev and many other Europeanized Russians at the time, had fed entirely off the European intellectual tradition and had nothing of its own to offer to the world or to world history. This ambivalence, as we will see, runs through Chaadaev's thought itself, and ultimately finds a novel, radical resolution.

And while the resolution that Chaadaev offered itself became a part of subsequent Russian intellectual history—vigorously debated between, on the one hand, the Westernizers who sought to join Russia (back) with the European tradition and, on the other, the traditionalist Slavophiles who sought to create for Russia a distinct and separate, non-European identity—Chaadaev's position remains unique vis-à-vis its later influences and appropriations, and even vis-à-vis what we will detect as Chaadaev's own Westernizing tendencies. It is not, however, our goal here to trace Chaadaev's influence and significance within the Russian context. Instead, we seek to reconstruct speculatively the political-theological dimension of his thinking and the conceptual problematic that he raises in his writing. What follows is not only interested in establishing the genealogical relevance of Chaadaev's thought for the political theological debate, but also—and much more significantly—in tracing how the concepts forming the problematic connecting sovereignty, exception, and nothingness become twisted when their interrelation is probed through the lens of this "outsider" (a Europeanized Russian articulating his speech as programmatically outside the European context), one who is nonetheless a contemporary of—and himself influenced by—the counter-revolutionaries that structure Schmitt's famous explorations: Louis de Bonald, Donoso Cortés, and Joseph de Maistre. In returning to Chaadaev under the rubric of political theology, then, we are not seeking to explore the ways political authority may be religiously legitimated or to elaborate possible analogies between the theological and the political. Rather, we seek to rethink some of political theology's constitutive conceptual antagonisms. We find Chaadaev posing a set of crucial questions: How does sovereignty function without or in the absence of topos and nomos (and thus also of humanity and history)? How is the relation, or non-relation, between sovereignty and the nothingness of the exception re-configured once sovereignty is related to an anomian territory of nothingness, absolutely excluded from the law of history? That is, how does the nothingness of the exception transform sovereignty when the latter, so to speak, immanently draws on its force?

An Exception to the General Law of Humanity

In the first of his *Philosophical Letters to a Lady*, written at the end of the 1820s in French and published in 1836 in Russian in the prominent Moscow social-literary journal *Telescope*, Chaadaev declares "we are a people of the exception [or: an exceptional people; *un peuple d'exception*]." (93/326)[5] From a historical perspective, this claim—that we, the Russians, are a people of the exception—reacts precisely to the complex knot of Russian identity at the time: pretending to be a world-historical

power, but separated—in its history, religion, and *mores*—from what Europeanized Russians like Chaadaev considered to be the true locus of historical progress, namely Europe itself. It is this separation that, in a first approximation, Chaadaev's declaration of "a people of the exception" indexes. However, in Chaadaev, this exception is declared so radically that it ceases to merely name the fact of historical separatedness of a given nation (Russians) from the broader European family of peoples. Here, exceptionality is something different than simply an indication of a special, exceptional characteristic, a supreme national trait differentiating one *ethnos* or nation from others. It is both more singular and more absolute than that. Chaadaev's discourse indicates an exception to the entire structure of world history as a teleological space-time that brings together differential self-enclosed national particularities. As Chaadaev elaborates this position, which made him infamous and eventually got him declared a madman, we "are isolated by a strange destiny from the universal movement of humanity." (91/325) This exceptional isolation locates Russians outside the universal education of humankind, which is to say, outside of history and its temporal horizons: "We are placed as outside of time [*comme en dehors des temps*], the universal education of humankind [*l'éducation universelle du genre humain*] has not reached us." (89/323)

The exception operates in more than one sense. It is an exception to the historical development of humankind across the providential movement of world history, indexing thereby an achronic persistence. But it also extends so far as to become a claim about a quasi-cosmological exclusion: "we do not in fact belong to any of the systems of the moral universe." (198/433) More generally, it is an exception to the law, the general law of humanity as such. "Looking at us, it seems that the general law of humanity [*la loi générale de l'humanité*] has been revoked [*révoquée*] for us." (96/329–30) The law that defines and trains the human across the time of its becoming-human, across history itself, does not apply. The resulting anomia is a state of exposure, in which the normative structures of the human and its guiding discipline, no less than the protection assured by the law, no longer hold. An exceptional state without nomos and even without topos ("Does not everyone [in Russia] have a foot in the air?" Chaadaev asks, "It seems that everyone is *en voyage*" [90/323])[6] that stands apart from and cannot be incorporated into the logics and laws of history. "We [are] alone in the world," not as part of the world and of its horizon or the nomos that structures it—but alone, without communication with or participation in the movement of the law and the anthropogenetic process of history; "we have given nothing to the world, and have taken nothing from it." (96/330)

This state of exception has failed to contribute to the "progress of the human spirit [*esprit*]" and has not "taken pains to create anything

in the realm of the imagination." (96/330) This dual failure is the exclusion of Russia from the providential movement of history that has educated humankind to be what it is—the movement that, for Chaadaev, traverses the Orient and the Occident, moving from the realm of imagination to that of reason. In this movement, Russia plays no role. To it, it contributes nothing. To have the general law of humanity be revoked entails thus a non-occurrence of a certain (seemingly natural) geo-historical role: "situated between the two great divisions of the world, between the East and the West… we are meant to reunite within us the two great principles of the intelligent nature, the imagination and reason, and bring together within our civilization the histories of the whole globe." A providential possibility of a grand teleological synthesis is conjured—only to be immediately apprehended as a phantasmic projection that has not occurred. "This is not the role that providence accorded us. Far from it, it seems not to have been involved in our destiny at all." (96/329)

For that synthetic destiny to have taken place, providence would have to have cared about nothingness. And yet, it did not. The result is not an imaginary and unreal teleological fulfilment, but rather a non-history and a non-time: "Our memories reach back no further than yesterday … The experience of the ages [*des temps*] is null and void for us." (92/326, 96/330) The nothing has not been educated, but rather is excluded from the reproduction of the world across time, from the history that makes the human be what it is. It names the exclusion from the entire process of (re-)collecting the past and projecting into the future, which weaves together a unified and continuous temporal horizon and can be called the work of history, but also the work of tradition. There is a severance and separation, a detachment from the world and from history. Rather than the great teleological synthesis, one finds a state of abandonment.

The force of Chaadaev's discourse—its importance as a fulcrum or theoretical pivot—lies precisely in those moments in which Russia and its people become a name for nothingness or the void, for a nullity—historical, moral, legal—defined through operations of exclusion and exception. Taking nothingness and exclusion seriously requires abandoning the logic of unity: to say that Russia is outside of time, a non-space, a nothingness—is precisely not to say that it is a national particularity with its own proper characteristics. It is not a unity within a field of unities, each held together by an idea or an essence, or a site within a historical order, but a non-space—not a moment within the unfolding of history, but a non-time. Nothingness cannot be added or superimposed to those determinations because it ungrounds their very logic: the amalgamation of national unity, providential history, and a spatial, mundane ordering. All of these are confounded by the declaration of the non-place and non-time. As such, the discourse of Russia is

no longer simply a national discourse, but a discourse of nothingness as exception to law and to history—an exception to the mechanisms that assure their reproduction, accumulation, continuity. In disclosing Russia as a non-space and a non-time, Chaadaev's discourse forces us to think the relation of nothingness to the unfolding historical ontology of humankind.

What is to be done with this nothingness and its exceptionality vis-à-vis humanity and the world-historical law? This is the question that Chaadaev's discourse confronts. To what degree must (or can) the nothing be incorporated into the law or, by contrast, to what degree does that exception ultimately unground the standing of the law as such? It may be that the law—here not the juridical law but the philosophical law of history—is taken to be what carries within it the necessity and capacity of eliminating and overriding the real state of the exception; or it may be, by contrast, that the exception is what ungrounds the law, its universal applicability, the force with which it narrates history. Can this exception, the exception of nothingness without a past and without a future—mark the interruption and breakdown of the narrativity of the philosophy of history and its normative force, which unites in itself a certain providential Christianity with a certain European modernity?

Chaadaev exposes nothingness, probing its anomic, atopic, and achronic dimensions—and yet the problematic that thereby emerges remains deeply ambivalent. It suggests two absolutely divergent trajectories as answers to the question of what is to be done with this non-time and non-space. The more conventional trajectory lays out a conservative solution of overwriting and negating the exception. A gap in the movement of history or in the unity-in-diversity of humankind cannot but appear, at least at first, as a defect, a lack to be re-incorporated into the universal unfolding of history. As we will see, Chaadaev certainly traces this path, especially in his *Philosophical Letters*: to follow it as a theoretical through-line leads to a classic portrait of Chaadaev as the originator of the Westernizing discourse that sought to align Russia fully with the West. This position exposes the nothing or the void only to overwrite it, to put it under erasure, by imposing on it a set of mimetic prescriptions that make sure that the exception, in the last instance, will follow the positive code and narrative laid out by the providential law of history. In this scenario, history's redemptive promises extend themselves globally and universally over all possible exceptions, a Christian claim regardless of whether it is articulated in a Christian or secular guise.

The conceptual topography of Chaadaev's problematic, however, also articulates a different exit, a radically countervailing solution. If the first trajectory identifies nothingness in order to overwrite

it and make it imitate the actualization of history in Europe, the second instead *affirms* this non-space and non-time, the nothingness that Russia indexes. It affirms this nothingness in its immanence, which is to say as inherent to itself, decoupled from whatever historico-ontological determinations and narrative arcs that would determine it as lack. Rather than a negativity to be incorporated or sublated, the exception becomes a force of rupture challenging the metaphysico-historical perspective on history, humanity, and the globe. This anomian non-space and non-time is apprehended as a force that, cartographically and chronologically, renders incoherent the idea of Europe as both Christian and modern, as the fulfillment of the theodicy of spirit.

What is held to in this trajectory is the basic assertion that Russia names, and persists in naming, the exception and disruption to the natural order of human kinship. As a being-without-history, it reveals the nature of historical and human universality to be a violent imposition and a mechanism of hierarchical differentiation. Here, the state of exception is not to be overcome in the restoration of order, but is what persists, exposing history itself as a ceaseless imposition of order on the anomic, achronic, and atopic territory of nothingness.[7]

The Figure of the Sovereign: Peter the Great

Unsurprisingly, things did not go well for Chaadaev following the publication, in 1836, of the first *Philosophical Letter*. At a time when state ideology was declaring Russia to be a powerful nation, politically and culturally independent of and even superior to the European powers, the text's provocation could not have been stronger. The furor was so great that the journal in which the piece had appeared was shut down and the emperor Nicholas I officially declared Chaadaev a madman. As a response, in 1837, Chaadaev started writing his *Apologia of a Madman*, which remained unfinished, but is widely considered to be his second major work after the *Letters*. The relation of the law—the providential law of history—to the exception stands at the heart of both the *Letters* and the *Apologia*. In the theoretical vision laid out in the *Letters*, however, there is no (exceptional) figure of the sovereign that would institute or overthrow the law, at least not in modernity. It is the law of providence itself that functions as the un-overthrowable sovereign order destined to overrule every possible exception, including the absolute exception of nothingness. The workings of historical providence are presented here as so powerful that they require no additional intervention of a sovereign act. It is the "interconnection of human ideas over successive centuries"—the very continuity of tradition—that "has led the human spirit to its present state" (89/323); the law is, as it were, self-fulfilling in a continuous, non-decisionist way.

This holds, however, primarily for the peoples that *are* a part of or take part in "this history of the human spirit." Seeing as this law does not hold—is absolutely "revoked"—for the people of the exception, the question arises how exactly, for Chaadaev in his Westernizing orientation in the *Letters*, the Russian *terra nullius* can ever be brought to conform to the universal. There is obviously no simple, continuous transition from nothingness to the law. Could this transition, then, consist in a sovereign act—an act of forcefully overwriting nothingness and instituting the law on and over this anomic territory? This is, after all, the way modern sovereignty operates: decide on the exception in order to uphold the order to which the exception is posed as a threat. Such a sovereign act would return the nothing into the global order of humankind. This operation of sovereignty is, in general, what keeps the providential machine going when the latter encounters its outside. In other words, from this perspective, the *Letters* articulate sovereignty and the providential law of history together as part of a dual mechanism that seeks to sublate every possible exception.

It is precisely in this role that the figure of the sovereign does indeed appear briefly in the first letter—as one who strives to overwrite the exception of nothingness with the West—only for this sovereign act to be overpowered and annulled by the atopic Russian void:

> Once, a great man [i.e. Peter the Great (1672–1725)] wished to civilize us,[8] and in order to give us a foretaste of enlightenment, he threw us the mantle of civilization; we picked up the mantle, but we never touched civilization itself. Later, a great Prince [i.e. Alexander I (1777–1825)], linking us to his glorious mission, led us victorious from one end of Europe to the other [i.e. during the Napoleonic Wars]; having returned home from this triumphant march across the most civilized countries of the world, we did not bring back anything except bad ideas and fatal errors… (96–7/330)

Sovereignty appears here as a supplementary mechanism for the possibility of associating with the already-established course of world history. The sovereign act is one of dealing with the exception by attempting to eliminate it, to transform the nothingness it indexes into a something, into a particularity properly partaking in the world-whole. Acting as a last resort, sovereignty seeks to reinstate the continuity and universality of history. However, in this *terra nullius*, it simply fails to take hold, to work. As Chaadaev is forced to admit, not even Peter the Great—this "greatest of our kings," as the *Apologia* will call him (291/525)—could overpower the force of nothingness.

We can see, in this diagnosis, the tension between Chaadaev the Westernizer, who wants the Russian lacuna to be overwritten and so sympathizes with the efforts of the monarchs who tried to do so, and

Chaadaev the thinker of absolute, immanent nothingness in which all mechanisms of incorporation break down. This ante-historical void absolutely resists any attempts to draw it back into the normal course of history. Rather than genuinely resolving this ambivalence, the *Letters* ultimately allow the significance of the sovereign act to disappear again behind the self-unfolding, unstoppable movement of the providential law of history:

> … the more we will seek to identify ourselves with it [i.e. Europe], the better we will find ourselves. Up to now, we have lived completely alone… Soon we will be swept into the universal vortex, bodies and souls, that much is certain… Let us do what we can to prepare the way for our descendants… In this way, we shall have done our posterity a favor and shall not have lived uselessly upon earth. (198–9/434)

This indefinite deferral of the gap's closure into the certain future—together with the invocation of the vague "we"—indexes Chaadaev's inability to think of any way to resolve the Russian gap, except through a renewed appeal and commitment to the providential law and its power to generate the universal future out of itself. What is, however, this "we" he invokes here, given that he has earlier claimed the full absence, in Russian existence, of any "we" in the sense of a people, a positive particularity, or a collective agent? In the absence of any mechanism of recollection, of any mechanism of tradition, how can the logic of accumulation across generations—implied in "do[ing] our posterity a favor"—even take hold in the Russian void? At the end of the first letter, an image of violently enforcing the overwriting of the exception is conjured up: "What is habit and instinct in other peoples must be forced into our heads with hammer blows." (92/326) But again, given that for Chaadaev all sovereign acts that attempted to do just that—Peter the Great's forced "Europeanization" being the prime example—have shown themselves to have failed, it is rather unclear how this police function could become efficacious. In the *Letters*, sovereignty is offered as a mechanism for disabling nothingness in its atopia and achronia, as an attempt to satisfy the desire to incorporate this absolute exception back into the universal world-whole—but there it is also shown to fail.

Apologia of a Madman remains within the conceptual space of nothingness, history, and tradition. However, instead of seeking to foreclose or overwrite this nothingness, Chaadaev now articulates its anti-traditionalist, subversive implications. During the time between the *Letters* and the *Apologia*, Chaadaev evidently continues to think about the role of the sovereign act vis-à-vis (the Russian) nothingness. In the later work, which constitutes Chaadaev's attempt to explain himself and

the *Letters*, before the emperor Nicholas I in particular, the figure of the sovereign re-appears with a much greater prominence—and with a different logic and conclusion. But while the *Apologia* does, indeed, appear more loyalist and proclaims a new, messianic destiny for Russia that was absent in the *Letters*, it is much more than merely an apologetic self-defense. Rather, it further radicalizes the conception of the absolutely ahistorical nothingness, now turning this nothingness *against* history and the world. The tension between the Westernizing orientation and the force of nothingness as precluding any Westernization escalates and ultimately implodes, leading to the radical reconceptualization of the sovereign act as the force of nothingness itself. Instead of that which keeps the providential machine going, sovereignty in the *Apologia* will completely unground and destitute it.

At the outset of the *Apologia*, however, Chaadaev's discourse seems to recapitulate the counter-revolutionary logic of suturing: the presence of the exception necessitates a sovereign power to (re-)establish the universal. It again takes the concrete form of Peter the Great, the monarch who, in his ultimate sovereignty, "abjured the old Russia in front of the entire world," thereby inaugurating a "new era." In this inaugural act, Peter does not decide on the exception—rather, he creates an abyss of discontinuity: "With his mighty breath, he swept away all our institutions; he dug an abyss between our past and our present and cast into it without distinction all our traditions." (291/525)[9] Here, the sovereign gesture is not merely a political one, or one of social or cultural transformation. It indexes an epistemic and temporal rupture that ungrounds Russia and evacuates its past. This appears precisely as the decision on the exception—and, in the *Apologia*, this act is presented as much more successful, at least at first, than in the first *Letter*. Peter "Westernized" Russia, and from that moment on, Russians never turned "our gazes away from the West," inhabiting a being-towards-the-West that, under the tutelage of "our princes," led to all morality, ways of speaking and understanding, and even manners of clothing becoming Western. Finally, learning to spell "the name of things" through Western texts, Russia reaches a state of resemblance, of seemingly being included in the West (291/525). It is as if Peter's sovereign decision makes possible a certain general education that results in Russia becoming a part of humankind through an imitation and absorption of the West. According to this logic, which has given Chaadaev the reputation of being one of the Westernizers, Peter stands for a break between an old traditional Russia and the Western orientation of modern Russia.

Here, then, we still encounter the logic of sovereignty as a mechanism for overwriting nothingness in its atopia and achronia. Sovereignty acts as a mechanism for securing the providential machine of world history that culminates in the Christian West. It is required to deal with

the exception, whose nothingness otherwise threatens to undermine the providential development of humankind. Sovereignty is what assures the perpetuation of the world as history, against all corrosive power of nothingness. It is the culminating moment of incorporation and upholds the world-historical machine when the latter encounters what is exceptional to it. To focus on this logic within Chaadaev's discourse is to avow nothingness as exception only to contain and resolve it through the sovereign act.

Nothingness Exposed

This logic of sovereignty, however, begins to come undone almost immediately in the *Apologia*, revealing in its wake a more complex conceptual morphology linking sovereignty and nothingness, one that fundamentally transforms the status and role of sovereignty in political theology. This path is inaugurated when one inquires after the conditions of efficacy of the sovereign act thus presented (as a complete rupture with the past and, then, a turning towards the West). It might seem that, by saying that Peter abolished "all our traditions," Chaadaev contradicts his earlier position in the *Letters*, which affirmed the complete emptiness of the Russian history. But there is, in fact, no reversal in the *Apologia* with regard to this emptiness. Chaadaev embraces it here no less decisively than in the *Letters*—along with the familiar image of the world-historical family against the backdrop of which the Russian absence of tradition is asserted:

> History is not made by the historian, but by the force of things [*la force des choses*]. … Every member of the historical family, however obscure and insignificant, carries this history within the depth of its being. *Precisely this history is what we do not have.* (294/527–8; emphasis added)

Rather than being all-powerful, as it first appears, Peter's sovereign act is predicated on the fact that it affirms a nothingness that precedes and exceeds it. What Peter the Great discovered was not a "rich and fecund history, living traditions, deeply-rooted institutions." Rather, he "found at home only a blank sheet of paper." The presence of genuine history would have resisted the act of its radical clearing, made it visible as a violent imposition, a colonization, and ultimately rendered it inefficacious. Instead, "we had nothing in our past existence that could legitimate resistance." (293/526–7) Rather than a particularity to be annihilated and incorporated (as another, re-fashioned particularity) into the universal education of humankind, what Peter found there was nothing. Such is the first condition of efficacy of Peter the Great's sovereign act.

> Do not be deceived: however great the genius of this man and the enormous energy of his will, his work was only possible within a nation whose past did not imperiously prescribe the path to follow, whose traditions were powerless to create for it a future, whose memories could be erased with impunity by an audacious legislator. (293/527)

In the *Apologia*, Russia persists in naming the absolute state of exception, absolute insofar as it marks an ontological foreclosure. It is "the force of things" itself that leaves Russia without history. Sovereignty appears as a violent act of erasure or subjection of the particular to the universal only under the assumption that particularity necessarily and essentially defines the territory. But it is precisely this assumption that Chaadaev rejects: what was there was not a particularity, but the nothing. Peter's operation of starting from a blank slate emerges now as the affirmation of the real nothingness that precedes and exceeds the act itself.

Above, we saw Chaadaev state that Peter the Great "dug an abyss between our past and our present"—an image suggesting a sovereign destitution of the given, the sovereign *potestas* necessary for clearing the (non-)space before the nothing, thus produced, can be affirmed. Yet, insofar as Russia never had a tradition, Peter merely exposed the nothingness that preceded this exposure. There is here no resistance and no discontinuity—only a disclosure and affirmation of nothingness that was already there, prior to the act, as the absolute state of exception to the universal law of history. What Peter destroyed, by contrast, was the phantasmic belief in a coherent (ethno-national-historical) particularity (to be incorporated into the movement of the universal). Sovereignty here discloses the exception, the nothing. If, in general, the sovereign act is necessarily unconditioned, then in Peter's case there is a very specific logic of unconditionality at work: his act is unconditioned because it is conditioned only by (the) nothing, affirming nothingness itself. It is not determined by the anomic nothingness as an object against which it reacts; rather, it asserts the primacy of anomia vis-à-vis the positive order of the law. It does so, furthermore—as we will see—not in order to overwrite anomia with nomos, but to side with the nothingness that is anomic (and even antinomian, though without a determinate negation).[10]

The logic of sovereignty as exposing and insisting on the nothingness that precedes it (and thereby, as we will see, generalizing its standing, by displacing the entire law to which it is an exception into its void) is confirmed by a strange achronic persistence of Russian nothingness across the *Apologia*. Each time sovereignty acts out of the nothing, in Chaadaev's account, it does not contain or include it, or transform it into something. It allows it to persist, exposing its ante-ontological

primacy—exposing it as the Real that must be thought of as prior to the logic of history and tradition. Indeed, the interaction between sovereignty and nothingness in the *Apologia*, (un)surprisingly, precedes the Petrine moment. At one point, Chaadaev refers to the example of the interregnum, the so-called "Time of Troubles" (1598–1613), which began with the death of the last Tsar of the Rurik dynasty and at the end of which the Romanov dynasty was established, the dynasty of Peter the Great and Nicholas I. The logic that can be glimpsed in the example is significant. The retrospective historical gaze "across this nothingness [*ce néant*]" (298/532), the nothingness of national history, finds a significant national event in the establishment of the monarchy, "a unique moment that cannot be admired enough, especially if one considers the void of the preceding centuries of our history"—a moment that "elevated the noble family that reigns over us." (299/533)

On the one hand, Chaadaev is here celebrating monarchy and contrasting it with the void of the Russian past, seemingly presenting Russia as capable of belonging to the European peoples. However, this traditional reading of Chaadaev fails to consider that none of the Russian monarchs managed to overcome this nothingness (as we saw Chaadaev observe in the *Letters*), and the fact that Peter, a hundred years after the establishment of sovereignty, still found the Russian past just as empty—and affirmed it *as such*. Another hundred years later, Chaadaev himself diagnoses the same void so as to insist on it as an absolute exception to the logic of history and tradition, the exception that Peter had disclosed. There is thus another lesson to be drawn here: nothingness persists across all these moments of sovereignty up to the present. It is, in fact, outside of historical time, indexing a fundamental achronia, an ante-historical void that cannot be re-mediated by history.[11]

Sovereignty arises out of this non-being, and yet it does not establish any regular being in its place. Nothingness persists across the institution and enactment of sovereignty—revealing itself not as something that can be overridden by sovereignty, but something that the sovereign can only disclose and affirm. The nothing is first, not as a beginning, *arche*, or origin (of a developmental process), but a persistent ante-archic force.

Chaadaev's proclamation that he loves his country "as Peter taught [him] to love it" (299/533) should, thus, not be understood as loving it in its Westernization—neither a stubborn and passionate attachment to a particularity, nor an exaltation of its Westernizing incorporation, but loving it *as* an unsurpassable void and *in* its nothingness. By contrast, as Chaadaev's discourse intimates, to love one's country as a particularity—as a something and not as a no-thing—is precisely to fall prey to a global logic of the exclusionary universal, to imagine oneself to be one of many that is universalizable, a harmony of difference radically

undermined by the presence of nothingness and the discourse of the exception. To love a territory in its nothingness, no longer interpreted as a lack or a retardation in the historical movement, is to see in it the force to unground the logic of (national) particularity and (world-historical) universality. In this affirmation of the nothing that was already there, Chaadaev recapitulates in thought what Peter the Great had uncovered and enacted politically.

In light of this, Chaadaev's assertion of the powerful, sweeping character of Peter's act may be understood not merely as a rhetorical trope customary for modern representations of sovereignty, but, first and foremost, as pointing to how this act swept away what *appeared* as a history—but in truth was no such thing. Peter's act of rupture emerges from this perspective as an immanent dispossession, a disinvesting from whatever semblance of history there was left, from whatever semblance of the proper that would cover up the impropriety of the void. It took a great sovereign not to be deceived by the appearance of a tradition and a particularity, but to see through it and reveal it as illusion. In fact, this is why Russia offered no resistance to Peter's sovereign act; the void of the past coincided, as it were, with "the void of our souls" (294/528). Rather than being an act of oppression and subjection, Peter's sovereign act exposed nothingness—in order to *submit* to it.

Submitting to Nothing, Beginning with Nothing

Peter the Great's sovereign act consisted, in effect, in avowing and enacting the void at the heart of Russian history. According to this logic, the sovereign act has the force that it does only to the extent that it enacts the nothingness that is already there—and through this affirmation, sovereignty submits itself (lovingly) to nothingness and begins immanently *from* this nothingness. "If," says Chaadaev, the absence of a proper history "is true, then it must be accepted, that is all." (293/527) Russian (in)existence is a "purely material fact" (295/529), and the lesson of Peter the Great is that, having no history, "we must learn to do without it" (294/528). Peter "perfectly apprehended," for Chaadaev, "what our point of departure [*point de depart*] on the path of civilization had to be." (292/526) Once nothingness is exposed and affirmed, one need only to submit to it and to begin immanently from it: such is the second key aspect of Chaadaev's reconfiguration of the logic of sovereignty.

This marks the *Apologia*'s most decisive departure from the *Letters*. Chaadaev's move here is no longer to convert Russia into a regularized world-historical site, but to affirm it *in* its absence of topos, tradition, and history. Having to do without history becomes here not a negative scenario—something to be superseded and overcome—but instead the

only way to unground the world-whole, indelibly entangled in its own history to such a degree that tradition has become a *burden*. The historical ontology of tradition remains in the background of the *Apologia*, but now no longer as something normative and desirable. Instead, Chaadaev programmatically declares the nothing as a disburdenment from tradition:

> It should not be doubted that a great part of the universe is oppressed by their traditions, by their memories: let us not envy the constricted circle in which it flounders. It is certain that, in the heart of most nations, there is a deep sentiment of accomplished life which dominates present life, and stubborn memory of past days which fills the days of today. Let us leave them to struggle with their inexorable past. (301/535)

This is one of the most subversive things about the *Apologia*: its complete undoing of traditional philosophy of history *from within* the same paradigm through which it was affirmed in the *Letters*, via precisely the (impossible yet real) immanence of nothingness. "I find," proclaims Chaadaev, "that our situation is a fortunate one, provided that we know how to appreciate it." (300/534) But what is to be celebrated or affirmed here? Nothing but nothingness itself: the fact that the Russian "we" inhabits its existence without history and without tradition—and yet this withoutness is no longer apprehended as lack. Rather than a lack, it suggests now a relief from the burdens of tradition.

To uncover and immanently affirm nothingness is to acknowledge the fact that it is free from the normative temporal horizon of history—that we cannot, from this standpoint, re-collect the past or project a future (the very movement that defines history and historical peoples). The revocation of the general law of humanity includes, at its heart, the revocation of historical temporality, generational accumulation, and national memory; in other words, the revocation of tradition. The immanent affirmation of nothingness entails beginning not with history but, as it were, *prior* to all temporal horizons. It entails no longer wishing what it does not have—but reducing itself affirmatively *to* nothingness. Seeing as "we" have failed to accomplish the movement of *Bildung* like "the other Christian peoples" (301/535), what is left is not regrets or making up for lost time. Rather, what is left is affirming an absolute division between the logic of reproduction of the West and the logic that the name Russia indexes: "from now on, it is necessary to remember to properly grasp the actual character of the country as it is given, as it is found in accordance with the very nature of things, and to make the most of it." (301/535) It is precisely in this that the lesson of Peter the Great consists. If, however, the void is no longer to be regularized into a part of tradition, then what exactly can Peter do

about it? What does it mean, for Chaadaev, to "do without history"? To understand this, we need to turn again to what Peter did, now that he recognized the insurmountable force of nothingness in this *terra nullius* and submitted to it.[12] Beginning from nothingness—from the blank ahistorical void that persists across all sovereign decisions—transforms radically the Westernizing logic of the *Letters*, even as the general world-historical orientation remains: Chaadaev does not want (the Russian) nothingness to persist only within itself, in utter irrelevance or abandonment, but wants it to become operative, without however partaking in the logic of history and tradition.

In the *Apologia*, Peter enacts a dual submission: to nothingness, but also to Europe. "He himself went into the countries of the West to make himself the smallest, and he returned the greatest among us; he bowed down before the West, and he arose our master and our legislator." (291/525) Recapitulating a Paulinian logic of diminution, Peter submits to the West in order to be exalted as sovereign. In submitting to being educated by Europe, Peter should have transplanted European political models into Russian soil, becoming a typical European sovereign and making Russia a typical nation. Yet, the transposition and displacement that occurs follows a distinctly different logic than incorporating nothingness into the West. The logic here enacts the displacement of the totality of tradition, the very embodiment of the providential world-historical whole: "He *passed over to us the West in its entirety*, the way the centuries had made it, and gave us all its history for the sake of history, and all its future [i.e., the future generated by tradition] for the sake of future" (293/526; emphasis ours)—a futurity that now started to function as decoupled from tradition.

As part of his sovereign act, Peter took the western tradition *as a whole*, uprooted it in one fell swoop, and gave it over *totally* to Russia, divorced from this tradition's continuity and reproduction. Here, there is no question of underdevelopment, of catching up, of joining the narrative of history and the family of nations as one particular branch, as might be expected from an imitative relation to the West. (As Chaadaev writes, "it would be a strange misjudgment of the role that has befallen us to reduce us to clumsily repeating the entire long series of follies committed by nations less fortunate than us," 300/534.) Rather, there is a total displacement and transposition of the Western tradition as a whole, the past as past, the future as future, into the ahistorical nothingness—which can, paradoxically, "fulfill" it totally by being totally disinvested from it:

> We approach every new idea with virgin minds. In our institutions, …in our morals, …in our opinions, …nothing opposes the *immediate fulfillment* of everything good [*tous les biens*] that Providence destines for humanity. (300–1/534–5; emphasis ours)

Despite Chaadaev's use of the familiar term, providence itself does not here function as part of or via tradition anymore. Instead, nothingness ungrounds it and fulfills it *immediately* and *totally* ("everything good"), immanently refusing the mediation of tradition, of the accumulated historical past and the sutured-together unified temporal horizon of history. This "fulfillment," and thus Russia's role and calling—both notions now decoupled from the continuity of tradition—consist for Chaadaev furthermore in nothing less than the immediate resolution of all of the world's most important social issues:

> It is my deep conviction that we are called upon to resolve most of the problems of the social order, to accomplish [*achever*] most of the ideas that arose in the old societies, to decide on the most serious questions that occupy humankind. I have often said this before, and I will eagerly repeat: we have been constituted, as it were, by the very nature of things, as a true jury for many trials pleaded before the great tribunals of human spirit and human society. (300/534)

Or, as Chaadaev puts it in one of his letters from 1834 (three years before the *Apologia* and two before the publication of the first *Letter*):

> We find ourselves in a completely singular condition in regards to world civilization, and this condition has not yet been appreciated. When reasoning about European events, we are more dispassionate, detached, impersonal, and, consequently, more impartial than Europeans in relation to all questions discussed. …The past weighs upon them unbearably, with the heavy weight of recollections, experiences, and habits, and oppresses them, no matter what they do. (II 88–9)

This should be appreciated not as an excessive celebration of the perceived Russian condition, but in the radicality of its underlying logic. The idea of a messianic destiny is by itself nothing new, but Chaadaev reframes it in such a way as to make it groundless. There is no ground, reason, or substance to support this kind of destiny; it is but a mobilization of the real, atopian force of nothingness. There is no prophecy to be fulfilled, for nothing was promised. Indeed, it is precisely the absolute exclusion of nothingness from all possible logics of history that makes its immanent future out of this nothingness real. "For us," Chaadaev programmatically claims, "there is no irrevocable necessity" (301/535), because it is precisely tradition and history that create such a necessity. "For us," nothing is necessary. "For us," only nothingness itself is necessary.

Although, as Chaadaev famously writes, Peter "found at home only a blank sheet of paper and with his strong hand wrote upon it

the words *Europe* and *West*" (293/527), he did not thereby make Russia catch up to the world-historical tradition. Rather, he proclaimed that nothingness was there prior to all inscription—and thereby affirmed and confirmed it as an absolute exception through this seemingly typical Westernizing gesture. To begin with the blank slate is to continue to be operative as fully detached from history, indifferently, with "none of the passionate interests" that define historical peoples (300/534). The point, again, is not to accumulate "our own" passionate interests, but to think *from within* the canceling-out of all attachment, without relation to any historical particularity or the horizon of tradition. This allows, in turn, to treat the tradition as a whole, the entire material of tradition, indifferently and without attachment—precisely as mere material, extracted from the logic of generations and temporal reproduction. This is what allows nothingness to "resolve the greatest problems of thought and society," and that is precisely what Peter recognized.

The logic of Peter's sovereign act, therefore, entails not the insertion of nothingness back into the providential history of the world. He did not transform the Russian people into a normal people, a particularity within the family of humankind. The logic of sovereignty is here not the containment of nothingness, but the exposure of its facticity and materiality, followed by the submission to this "purely material fact." What we encounter is another bifurcation in Chaadaev's problematic, a radical shift from the submission of Peter to Europe—and thus of modeling sovereignty on its European model—to a submission to the material force of nothingness, to that exception to nomos and topos that Russia has named from the outset.

It is as if Chaadaev emphasizes the success of Peter's Westernization only to take it to such a radical extreme that the West itself becomes neutralized by the nothing. In transporting the whole of Europe into the anomic territory of the exception, into the ahistorical void, Chaadaev—with Peter—unmoors its normative standing as tradition and as law. It is in programmatic opposition to the tradition-based law of world history that, we would suggest, Chaadaev's positioning of nothingness as the "true jury" should be understood—not as representing another, similar but opposed law, but as annulling and deactivating the law of history and tradition as oppressive, binding, violent, and all-too attached. Only through counterposing sovereignty that upholds the law with a sovereignty that affirms nothingness as the ante-historical Real which precedes and exceeds, and thereby fully subverts, the law (in this case: the law of history, succession, and tradition)—resolving all social-political issues immediately and without remainder—can we really understand Chaadaev's claim that "our situation is a fortunate one."

Between Sovereignty and Non-Sovereignty

To sum up the preceding analysis, in the *Apologia*, Peter the Great's sovereign act and its significance consisted of three moments. First, he affirmed and freed up the force of nothingness in the Russian past as Russia's "singular condition" and "the role that has befallen" it (a role fully detached, however, from the providential narrative of world-history)—an affirmative reduction to nothingness. Secondly, through his dual submission—to Europe and to nothingness—instead of grafting the zero onto the European tradition, he submitted the totality of tradition, the logic of tradition as such, to nothingness, resolving the world-whole into it. He let the anomic, nonmediated, nondevelopmental force of nothingness become operative vis-à-vis the world-whole, uprooting it totally, in its entirety, so as to treat it wholly as the material to be dispassionately taken up and reconfigured. In turn, this gave rise to a different logic of futurity, one that proceeds, immanently and without mediation, *from* the nothing. No longer a world-historical synthesis proceeding from the logic of tradition and the particular traditions of the historical peoples, the future is, likewise, submitted to the nothing.

Importantly, nothingness is here that from which sovereignty arises and not its object. Instead of deciding on the state of exception, the act of sovereignty is one in which the absolute exception of the void itself deactivates and overthrows the law of history and the logic of tradition—an act of total displacement and ungrounding. As it resolves all of the world's social problems entirely, immediately, once and for all, the operativity of this nothingness becomes nothing short of revolutionary—despite Chaadaev's monarchism and dislike of political revolutions. (This kind of overthrow of the very logic of modern philosophy of history is, however, not a political revolution—but rather something like a total resolution of the world, its stripping of all tradition, an absolute disburdenment.)

This nonmediated, total resolution is not contemporary with the temporality of the world-historical law—instead suspending it as a whole. The achronic void is not contemporaneous with the world; it has no past or future that would move in line with the narrative of world history. "We have never," insists Chaadaev, "lived under the fatal pressure of the logic of the times." (301/535) The nothing is fundamentally non-contemporaneous with the law: it is not actual, but *real*. Accordingly, the futurity that can be claimed for this nothingness exceeds all imaginaries of progress ("we are allowed to hope for prosperity even greater than the one dreamt of by the most ardent ministers of progress," 301/535). Nothingness is conceived not as a starting point of a new history or a new series in history; it is non-foundational—not an origination of a trajectory of development, accumulation, or mediation. Rather, it is the void into which the providential history and its reproductive systems are collapsed.

In the third moment, as it were, of his sovereign act, Peter the Great pointed the way to this collapse—all that is left is, for Chaadaev, to bring it about. It is only in view of this, and in view of Chaadaev's reconfiguration of sovereignty as the operativity of immanent nothingness and the total ungrounding of tradition, that his call for a new sovereign in the *Apologia* becomes comprehensible. Right after observing that the atopia named Russia has never existed under the pressure of the times and that there is for it "no irrevocable necessity," Chaadaev claims: "to reach these final outcomes [*résultats définitifs*], we need only one single sovereign act of that supreme will …that more than once already opened [for Russia] new paths." (301–2/535–6). It is easy to dismiss this simply as a loyalist gesture addressed to Nicholas I—but that would mean to disregard the link between sovereignty and nothingness that has been forcefully constructed by Chaadaev by this point in the text. Faced with the modern world oppressed by tradition and marked by the constitutive exclusion, the collapse of the world becomes the only true demand—the only true resolution—and it is this demand that is expressed by Chaadaev's call for the sovereign act. A messianic demand, perhaps, but one that is absolutely groundless, operative only immanently from within the nothing.

In the act of sovereignty thus conceived, the process of accumulation, mediation, and succession that determines the trajectory of historical peoples (and chains them to it) is stripped of its power. Sovereignty acts here no longer as the culmination and the ultimate enforcement of the providential history of the West, but as the ante-ontological force that can uproot and deactivate it. In submitting to nothingness, it becomes a figure of *non*-sovereignty, insofar as it marks the abdication of the sovereign imperative for order, for suturing it against all a(nti)nomian restlessness. This non-sovereignty is located in the force of nothingness itself, the very corrosive force that in the end has the power to make operative its exceptionality and, in so doing, to subvert the providential machine that unites, through a multitude of interplays, (the Christian) God and (the Western) Man. It is the exception itself that is the forceful, material, extra-historical, geographical fact—which cannot be decided upon or overruled. Peter the Great is a non-sovereign because his "decision" is guided by the facticity and materiality of nothingness. Here, sovereignty sides with and manifests the force of nothingness against the conjunction of Christian economy and modern philosophy of history, a conjunction characteristic of counter-revolutionary political theologies of order.

It has been less significant for our analysis that this force of nothingness is identified by Chaadaev with an actual political and social entity (Russia), and this non-sovereignty with an actual historical figure (Peter the Great). What we have traced is the very *logic* of sover-

eign nothingness underlying Chaadaev's reconfiguration of these two names—a reconfiguration that turns them from familiar and historical, into absolutely ahistorical and atopic, programmatically void. The significance of Chaadaev's political theology is therefore twofold. On the one hand, it may be read as a powerful political-theological transformation of Russia and the figure of Peter the Great—this decisive figure for all subsequent Russian history; a unique speculative theory of the Russian event. No wonder that Chaadaev's emptying out of the Russian tradition, and his affirmation of this void as subverting the European tradition in its entirety, becomes subsequently a part of Russian revolutionary thought.[13] More importantly, however—in a way that is not limited to discussions of Russia or the Russian context—Chaadaev's immanent, non-sovereign nothingness presents a subversion of the Christian-modern political theology of history, a subversion unparalleled in early nineteenth-century thought and remaining singular to this day. In contrast to the modern sovereignty as indexing and upholding the logic of constitutive exception, Chaadaev advances a theory of the exception become absolute, an ante-historical Real which history excludes—but which itself becomes a real force (the force of the Real) in the figure of the (non-)sovereign. In its total breakdown of the modern relation between law and exception, Chaadaev points in his thought, often despite himself, to a total breakdown of the world of modernity in its dominant mode.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Cristina Beltrán and Kennan Ferguson, as well as James Martel and Harsha Ram, for their support of this project at its various stages. Kirill Chepurin's work on this article was supported by the Russian Science Foundation under grant No. 19–18–00100.

Notes

1. See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Jacob Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
2. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Roberto Esposito, *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*, trans. Zikaya Hanafi (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015); Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'," in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Carlson (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3–67; Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *InTensions* 5, 2011, 1–47; Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, "Improvement and Preservation: Or, Usufruct and Use," in Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (eds.), *Futures*

of Black Radicalism (London: Verso, 2017), 83–91; Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Notes for a Critique of the 'Metaphysics of Race'," *Theory, Culture and Society* 28:1, 2011, 138–148; Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 66–111.

3. Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).
4. We explore the logic of immanence and nothingness in Chaadaev without prioritizing the political-theological problematic in a companion essay. See Kirill Chepurin and Alex Dubilet, "Russia's Atopic Nothingness: Ungrounding the World-Historical Whole with Pyotr Chaadaev," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 24:6 (2019), forthcoming.
5. References are to the French-Russian edition of Chaadaev's complete works in two volumes: Pyotr Chaadaev, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy i izbrannye pis'ma. Toma 1 i 2* [Complete works and selected correspondence. Vols. 1 and 2] (Moscow: Nauka, 1991). All citation is to Volume I unless otherwise indicated. All translations into English are our own; we have, however, consulted and adapted from two extant translations: Petr (Pyotr) Chaadaev, "Letters on the Philosophy of History: First Letter," trans. Valentine Snow, in *Russian Intellectual History: An Anthology*, ed. Marc Raeff (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966),160–173; and Peter (Pyotr) Chaadaev, *Philosophical Works of Peter Chaadaev*, ed. Raymond T. McNally and Richard Tempest (Dordrecht: Springer Science + Business Media, 1991).
6. For a fuller elaboration of this quote and the question of topos, see our "Russia's Atopic Nothingness."
7. If one interprets Chaadaev as a Westernizer, one interprets his discourse as an auto-colonial one that proclaims one's own territory and not the territory of the Other as *terra nullius*, without past, without law, without history. In this, there is a partial convergence with the logic outlined by Schmitt, for whom *terra nullius* indexes a land open for appropriation within the modern European world order—emerging with the discovery of the New World. As Schmitt notes, "the emerging new world did not appear as a new enemy, but as *free space*, as an area open to European occupation and expansion." In this new global order, "[l]ines were drawn to divide and distribute the whole earth" in a way that served to justify European colonial expansion. See Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, trans. G.L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press, 2006), 86–87. According to this logic, "the designated zone of free and empty space" is analogous to the state of exception and exposed to appropriation and colonization (Schmitt, *Nomos*, 98). Even in his Westernizer modality, what makes Chaadaev's position distinct is his declaration that it is precisely the territory to which he, in some sense, belongs that is *terra nullius*. But this is hardly, as will become clear, the most theoretically-inventive part of Chaadaev's discourse. The alternative trajectory, as we already proleptically suggest in the preceding paragraph, will affirm the non-space and non-time, the nothingness of Russia, as an exception that has the force to unground the nomos of the world and transform the very concept of sovereignty that

is, implicitly, aligned with it. Here, the state of exception, the *terra nullius* is not something to be claimed and appropriated so as to expand and uphold the order of the world as it is, but something that exposes the ineluctable violence in the law (of history) and the sovereignty that upholds it. As such, it becomes a discourse of *terra nullius* and the void in direct combat with that of Schmitt.

8. Peter the Great is so important to Chaadaev, and to Russian thought more generally, because he was seen as attempting to (forcefully) Europeanize Russia—to modernize its traditionalist culture into that of a powerful modern European nation.

9. The next section will return to resolve the apparent contradiction between this and the fact that, according to the *Letters*, Russia never had any tradition at all.

10. In affirming the primacy of anomian nothingness, Chaadaev's discourse might be seen as siding, broadly, with the apocalyptic position elaborated by Taubes against Schmitt—if, that is, one can at all fruitfully compare a nineteenth-century Russian intellectual writing in French with a twentieth-century Jewish intellectual writing in German. As Taubes astutely diagnosed, Schmitt's position as a jurist was "to legitimate the world as it is"—an orientation that expressed itself, among other things, in the elaboration of the concept of the *katechon*, which "holds the chaos that pushes up from below." Taubes's famous response is: "I can imagine as an apocalyptic: let it go down. I have no spiritual investment in the world as it is." See Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 103. As Taubes elsewhere summarizes: "Carl Schmitt thinks apocalyptically, but from above, from the powers that be; I think from the bottom up" (Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt*, 13). Although Chaadaev's position, as we articulate it, is closer in this regard to Taubes's vision, the distinctions are significant, including that for Chaadaev the affirmation of nothingness results in the transformation of the very concept of sovereignty. The remainder of the paper will articulate the nature of this transformation. In linking nothingness to a novel conception of sovereignty, one might see a partial resonance with another twentieth-century thinker, central, though in an underappreciated way, to the problematic of political theology, namely Georges Bataille. Early stages of thinking through Bataille from this perspective were presented in Alex Dubilet, "Towards a Political Atheology: Georges Bataille on Sovereignty and Nothingness," *American Comparative Literature Association* (Los Angeles, March 2018), which forms a part of an ongoing book project, tentatively titled *Political Atheology*.

11. This ante-historical void has not been re-mediated by history—and nor, as we shall see, will it be. Both the *Letters* and the *Apologia* invoke in this regard the image of the geological pre-history of the earth: "… if your life has not been powerful and profound, if the law which presides over your destinies is not a radiant principle, nourished during the great days of national glories, but merely something pale and dull, shunning sunlight in the subterranean spheres of your social existence—do not, then, reject the truth, do not imagine yourself to have lived the life of histori-

cal nations, when in fact, buried in your vast grave, you have only lived the life of fossils." (298/532) This image connects to the concept of chaos and to Cuvier's theory of geological catastrophe that precedes the life of the world as such: "There persists [in this, unconstituted life] the chaotic fermentation of things of the moral world, similar to the revolutions of the globe that preceded the present state of our planet. We are still in that stage." (91/325)

12. To stress again, the logic elaborated here stands in opposition to the Schmittian logic insofar as it is no longer oriented towards the appropriation or colonization of *terra nullius*. Instead, it is here a question of affirming the primacy of nothingness and its anomic force, in a way that ungrounds the law and submits sovereignty to nothingness, thereby transforming sovereignty's very logic. One might recall, in addition, Agamben's exploration of the contest between Schmitt and Benjamin over "the zone of anomie that, on the one hand, must be maintained in relation to the law at all costs, and on the other, must be just as implacably released and freed from this relation." Our reconstruction of Chaadaev may be seen as siding with Benjamin—but, importantly, via a rewriting of how sovereignty operates in relation to that nothingness. If, as we identify below, there is a revolutionary kernel in Chaadaev, we might see in that a certain convergence with Benjamin's articulation of the revolutionary force of divine violence over and against the preservation of the law and the world. However, whereas Benjamin—and, implicitly, Agamben in his discussion of Benjamin—prioritize inoperativity in relation to the law, this is not the direction that Chaadaev pursues. See Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 59 and 64.

13. Already Alexander Herzen crucially recognized Chaadaev's importance for the socialist-revolutionary tradition—even though Herzen knew full well that Chaadaev himself was not, politically, a revolutionary. See Alexander Herzen, "On the Development of Revolutionary Ideas in Russia [1851/1858]," in Kathleen Parthé (ed.), *A Herzen Reader* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 14–15. As Herzen puts it, "Chaadaev's letter was a sounding trumpet" for an entire generation of "young fighters [who] entered the arena" (15). As mentioned earlier, Chaadaev's ideas become, of course, a part of basically all subsequent Russian modes of thought—the Slavophile no less than the Westernizing or the revolutionary.