



## Ilyenkov's Image in Memoirs

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**ABSTRACT:** Published in 2024, “Ilyenkov’s Image in Memoirs” is an anthology of texts written at different times by different authors. The topics covered are extremely broad: Ilyenkov’s everyday life, personal life, his philosophical research, teaching and other social activities. Together with the authors, the reader will be able to look at Ilyenkov’s personality from a different angle, to understand more deeply the context and the essence of key philosophical issues reflected in his work. Despite the lack of chronological and thematic structure, the book is integral in its own way, as art works are integral: various texts complement and reveal the content of each other, allow us to see how Ilyenkov’s work grows and develops over time. Reading the memoirs allows us not only to form a livelier and more comprehensive picture of Ilyenkov’s life and work, but also to reflect on what exactly and why we strive to retain in our own activities, how we ourselves treat philosophy in general, how we understand its role in history.

**KEYWORDS:** Evald Ilyenkov, Zagorsk experiment, thinking, the problem of ideal.

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Gennady Lobastov, one of Ilyenkov’s closest disciples, edited and published the “Ilyenkov’s Image in Memories” anthology in Moscow in 2023. This is the second edition of the collection, supplemented by the works of young authors, memoirs by Ilyenkov’s relatives, as well as others for whom Ilyenkov was, and remains, an important part of their lives, a source of creative energy, friend, colleague and teacher. The book includes texts by world-renowned philosophers such as Mikhail Lifshitz, Felix Mikhailov, Vadim Mezhuev and Helmut Seidel, as well as lesser known authors: Ilyenkov’s wife Olga Salimova, his nephew Nikolay Rozanov, his colleagues and students (Novokhatko, Khamidov, Potyomkin and others).

This is certainly one of the many quasi-philosophical books published today, and the potential reader may rightly ask themselves: is it worth their time to read it? Does this book have unique content or is it a retelling of what has long been known? Despite the heterogeneity of the circle of possible readers, let us try to make some assumptions.

First, I wish to dispel fears about the formalism inherent in some commemorations—in this case, Ilyenkov’s centenary. The contributors did not set out to write reverently about his “great contribution to the development of philosophy”. Starting from the first text—a letter from Ilyenkov’s wife Olga Salimova—the reader finds themselves as an unwitting witness to the creative and life drama, not an addressee and even less an “object of influence.” In it and further on, through the images of the people closest to Ilyenkov, the real space of Ilyenkov’s existence is revealed: fragments of everyday life, working days, participation in public affairs and points of contact with the key events of his time. We catch hold of Ilyenkov’s portrait which now acquires tangible contours.

The book is divided into five sections, but the texts are not arranged in chronological or any other formal order. Rather, it resembles a painting in which fragments of various shapes, colors, and sizes are drawn in detail, independent in their own way, but they become truly expressive and understandable only as part of a coherent artistic plan. Each successive work thwarts the expectations of the reader accustomed to standard methods of structuring and cataloguing and offers to solve the mystery of its appearance.

Thus, after idyllic sketches of the life of Ilyenkov and his relatives in N.E. Rozanov’s memoirs, Alexander Suvorov, a pupil at the Zagorsk boarding school for deaf-blind children, who left us in January 2024, directs us to the center of pain. Memory often seeks to relieve us of the

burden of difficult experiences, to create a utopia of the past, a “lost paradise.” But to stay true to ourselves, we need to consider the other side of events. Here we are not talking about the torment of bad subjectivity, boringly chasing around a set of personal grievances against the world and self-pity, but about a common pain, about what it means to “live the problems of the entire human race” (Suvorov 2024, 42).

To live is to direct your whole self to the root of the problem. To do this, the root of the problems must be seen. “In essence, it is a question of why mankind in general has left the animal state and acquired such a troublesome ability as consciousness,” Ilyenkov writes to Alexander (Suvorov 2024, 45). One cannot get away with an elegant aphorism that is easy to quote. The answer to this question implies the unfolding of the totality of the essential definitions of human existence, a *free* unfolding.

The presence of consciousness in a human being seems to be a mere given, which cannot not be, so the question of its formation often remains in the shadows. But what if a person is cut off from the world due to lack of sight and hearing, like Suvorov, and images of things do not arise “naturally” for them? Then the question of the origin of consciousness is in full view. To determine and reproduce all the necessary conditions for the formation of human thinking, sensuousness, the ability to perceive the world and act in it: this was the task faced by teachers, psychologists and philosophers—participants in the Zagorsk experiment on the education of deaf-blind children, among whom was Evald Ilyenkov. And the task was accomplished, and not “optimally” accomplished: the educators and pupils far exceeded the “necessary minimum” like acquiring the simplest skills of self-service in everyday life and performing “non-creative work that does not require intelligence” (Ilyenkov 1991, 22). The result of the work was the nurturing of bright, talented people—personalities.

Many of the memoirs published relate to the Zagorsk experiment and are devoted to communication with the pupils. The authors' encounter with the children undoubtedly left a lasting impression on their memory. They appreciated “how each of them was able to promptly and decisively steer the conversation back on track. This could be called the essential orientation of their thinking. It was impossible not to notice it!” writes Nina Guseva (2024, 316). Reflecting on our own life journey in hindsight, we involuntarily divide events into essential and non-essential: those filled with living human meaning, and empty, lost time.

And, although immateriality ultimately reveals itself as its own moment, we are obliged to admit that sometimes we have deformed ourselves under completely accidental circumstances. More surprising is the reality that for the Zagorsk children, who for a considerable part of their lives were deprived of such a luxury as losing time—one missed day could have been critical. All their energies had to be directed to the formation of human abilities, from the most trivial to the highest. The fullness of life wasn't achieved in the typical way—by recklessly trying everything in a chaotic engagement with reality—but rather in a more deliberate manner, made possible only through a deep understanding of the nature of thought.

This kind of education is not like the method of upbringing that is familiar today. Real developmental assistance implies the creation of conditions for self-development; the formation of a thinking subject is always through a process of self-movement. This was well understood by the Zagorsk educators, so there is nothing more further from reality than the notion of the boarding school as a “human conveyor belt” as if in some dystopia. In the memoirs of Grigoriy Vodolazov, Alexandr Khamidov, Greta Solovieva and others from the school there are brief sketches of portraits of the pupils, genuine individuals who, in their own unique ways, revealed themselves in both their personal and social lives.

As vivid a phase of Ilyenkov's activity as the Zagorsk experiment was, it is by no means the only pedagogical project associated with his name. Sergey Kurganov's memories are devoted to teaching mathematics to schoolchildren. This is a special subject. The ability to operate freely with mathematical abstractions seems to be present in some people from birth and completely absent in others. The author, however, is driven by a different idea: mathematics can be taught in a way that it is not a collection of axioms alien to humanity, forced upon students through rote learning and drilling. Mathematical concepts are a form of interaction with the surrounding world, which crystallize in practical transformative activity, and then internalised into a new creative impulse. Isn't it preferable to organize teaching, beginning with the fundamentals, as a dynamic and creative process of exploring and mastering space? The author of the project for the new mathematics curriculum discussed this with Ilyenkov “Our Schools Must Teach How to Think!” (Ilyenkov 2002, English version as Ilyenkov 2007). Later Kurganov contributed to the project of Vasilii Davydov's, the famous Soviet teacher and psychologist, on reframing the whole program of teaching

mathematics at school, which should have been implemented in the USSR in the 1980s. The transformed times prevented the realization of this endeavor, and it likely still awaits its continuation and further development.

When it comes to education and training, it is very easy to view oneself as one of the “already educated and trained,” someone who, from the pinnacle of their own knowledge, shares wisdom with other, unwise people. The temptation is especially great if you find yourself in the role of an authorized representative of the “only true doctrine” and understand your task unambiguously: all key philosophical questions have already been solved before us by great men, you need only adhere strictly to the established principles and apply them in practice. To descend from the heights of omniscience, to look more closely into your own way of thinking—the motive of the famous Ilyenkov-Korovikov Theses, was received rather frostily by some and with great enthusiasm by others. Not surprisingly, the detractors often had the last word when it came to administrative issues. Ilyenkov had to overcome a lot of obstacles, and there are dark figures in the memoirs who were responsible for them. But writes Richard Kosolapov, editor-in-chief of “Communist” journal, a prominent Soviet activist and philosopher, Ilyenkov “embodied dialectics within himself, ready to serve as both its instrument and source” (Kosolapov 2024, 65), and this could not but resonate within the thinking community.

The accounts of associates, students, and other people who knew Ilyenkov, both closely and not so closely, help reconstruct the philosophical atmosphere of that time. It was not only filled with bureaucrats and party functionaries. The era that liberated individuals from the necessity of fragmenting themselves and selling each part at a bargain price, if it had a marketable form, gave rise to a multitude of people eager to immerse themselves fully and without hesitation in all the “achievements of human culture,” pursuing them with fervor and persistence. Alexey Bosenko, the Ukrainian philosopher famous for his work in aesthetics, writes about this particularly expressively, with the disappointing conclusion that with the disappearance of such a space we cannot expect masterpieces, and what is created today “is not even worthy of analysis” (Bosenko 2024, 216). The conclusion is not indisputable; however, it seems justifiable that the quest for answers to the most profound, eschatological “final” (and also “initial”) questions was a genuine and deliberate necessity for socialist society. This society aimed to

consciously create the conditions of life rather than blindly relying on market forces.

The problems of the rational organization of production and consumption, the creation of new, truly human *forms of communication* (Marx) require the most responsible goal setting, understanding the essence of things, and do not tolerate the format of idle chatter. There is no room for a motley kaleidoscope of opinions; any question must be explored deep into itself, down to the very beginning, to the *original principle*.

Materialism cannot be materialism if it is unable to explain a thing from itself without the influence of external notions of good or evil. It is no coincidence that Ilyenkov was so focused on the problem of the ideal. Gennadiy Lobastov writes: “Maintaining the depth and completeness of the problem of the ideal while remaining on materialistic grounds is not only exceptionally challenging but also the only feasible approach” (Lobastov 2024, 355), because otherwise the very notion of the initial principle becomes meaningless, turning into a universal explanatory reference to something otherworldly. The ideal, understood as a form of activity of social-historical human beings, is the basis of the conscious transformation of reality, and, although Ilyenkov has been accused of ‘gnoseologism’, for him, the essence of closely studying the theoretical process lies precisely in the transformation of the mode of being. Therefore, Ilyenkov’s worst enemy was positivism, empiricism which, under the guise of sanity, offered a resigned acceptance of the existing reality. Only the consistent unfolding of thought with the support of the entire previous philosophical culture allows us to see the integrity of the historical process through all collisions, and thus to understand trends and act consciously. Such Hegelian concrete thinking is the key to the formation of an integral personality—the ultimate goal of all transformations. This is the “determinate indeterminacy” (Lobastov 2024, 353) of Ilyenkov’s philosophical position, which implies a readiness to reread and rediscover the thinkers of the past, and not being satisfied with established ideas. Here one should look for the key to a true understanding of freedom. The very same freedom that is mercilessly touted at every turn, and even somewhere, some claim, everywhere present (where we are not, of course).

Ilyenkov’s philosophical heritage can be written about endlessly and there is no need to try to cover it in this review. Almost all authors touch upon it, incorporating it into their work in the context of their own life experiences. For some people Ilyenkov is associated with moments of

personal triumph, fruitful creative work; for others—the moment of failure, which, nonetheless, did not become a reason to stigmatize or devalue the efforts made. One way or another, we see how Ilyenkov's work becomes a link with many other works, how it grows, penetrating time and space, uniting those who are not indifferent to the problems of Truth, Goodness and Beauty, and thus to the fate of all humanity.

But the clouds are thickening. In the memoirs we read that socialist China is at war with socialist Vietnam, young people are looking more and more in the direction of “fresh” and promising positivist concepts, Ilyenkov is losing his students. Humanity did not go “Ilyenkov's” way, leaving the questions he posed still unanswered. One can endlessly lament about his early departure, unaccomplished works, be indignant about the unfolding harassment, but all such lamentations will be external to Ilyenkov's time and personality. The philosopher passed judgment on himself. Thoughtfully and decisively.

Ilyenkov's closest students (Gennadiy Lobastov, Lev Naumenko, Sergey Mareev) write that he could not have lived today, that in the present time there are simply no things vital for Ilyenkov. But is it possible to define our time as “non-Ilyenkovian” on this basis?

The book contains recollections by some who never saw Ilyenkov alive. For all of them—the director of History and Politics Institute in Russia Alexey Ananchenko and young Russian philosophers Maria Predeina, Maxim Morozov—their acquaintance took place through his work and became a turning point, inspiring them to consign a pile of pseudo-philosophical wastepaper to the dustbin. Ilyenkov's thought became a discovery that made it impossible to think and act as before. Ilyenkov's figure outgrew all formal educational and academic obligations, connecting them to the very realm of philosophy, forcing them to work tirelessly on its expansion.

So, in answer to the original question about the fate of the book, we note that “The Image of Evald Ilyenkov in Memories” is an extremely inconvenient book if one tries to quickly extract useful information from it. The memoirs were written at different times by completely different authors, there is no subject index, “factology” dissolves into personal impressions and lyrical digressions. If you read it, then read it from cover to cover, leaving aside all pragmatic intentions. One must prepare for complete immersion.

Gennadiy Lobastov writes in the preface that memories “live partly in our everyday reflection and therefore form an actual part of our life and are partly immersed in the composition of our subjectivity, which

unconsciously nourishes our emotional and mental certainty of perception of the world” (Lobastov 2024, 7). We might add that remembering is a creative process. In it, the structure of the actual, present-day form of interaction with the world around us is framed by images retained from the past but actualized also in the present. Reading memories is not just a way to visualize and feel past events, but also an opportunity to see the vector of movement, thoughts and actions that are attached to the present and still continue. Recollection is cognition—Plato spoke of this, and then Hegel showed how becoming external becomes internal, or “being remembered,” to cite another meaning of the German word “Erinnerung.” In remembering we unite disparate fragments of accumulated experience, reveal their essence, and provide them with direction, thereby laying the groundwork for resolving the most pressing contradictions.

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