Ideas have consequences. We suppose that is one lesson of the recent revelation by the French secret service that the Russian-born French philosopher and civil servant Alexandre Kojève was a Soviet agent for some thirty years. It would be difficult to overstate Kojève’s eminence in the pantheon of twentieth-century French intellectuals. Daniel Johnson, who reported the story in the London Daily Telegraph, noted that Kojève’s subterranean influence is ubiquitous. His ideas echo around our political arena. Francis Fukuyama’s end of history is recycled Kojève. So is Tony Blair’s vision of a post-conservative, post-national, post-political, post-historical Europe.

In intellectual and cultural terms, Kojève’s influence is even more extensive. Born Alexander Kochevnikoff in Moscow in 1902, Kojève left Russia in 1920, going first to Poland and then to Germany, where he encountered two life-changing personalities: his uncle Wassily Kandinsky, who became a close friend, and the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel, which seduced him utterly. In 1926, Kojève moved to Paris, changed his name, and became a French citizen. In 1933, he embarked on what is probably the most famous philosophical seminar of the century: his Marxist-inspired, line-by-line dissection of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit. His students included André Breton, Georges Bataille, Raymond Aron, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Eric Weil, Jacques Lacan, and Raymond Queneau: the good, the bad, and the ugly of twentieth-century French intellectual life. Among Kojève’s later admirers was Allan Bloom, who described him as the most brilliant man I ever met. Aron thought him more intelligent than Sartre.

Recalling Kojève’s seminar in his Mémoires (1983), Aron wrote that the subject was both world history and the Phenomenology. The latter shed light on the former. Everything took on meaning. Even those who were suspicious of historical providence did not resist the magician: at the moment, the intelligibility he conferred on time and events was enough of a proof. It is difficult for the uninitiated, namely, anyone who did not come under the spell of Kojève’s personality to understand his influence. The printed version of his lectures Introduction to the Reading of Hegel (1968) are almost comical in their fuzzy megalomania. (Though in this, it has to be admitted, they closely resemble the teachings of Hegel himself.) The book is full of statements like this: there is History because there is Philosophy and in order that there may be Philosophy.
Although like Hegel he professed to believe that history—or at any rate History—came to an end with the *Phenomenology*, in 1945 Kojève nevertheless decided to join the Ministry of Economy and Finance because, Aron reports, he wanted to know how it [history] happened. Like Plato, he wanted to advise a tyrant, in the shadows exercise influence over the visible actors. For more than twenty years, Kojève (who died in 1968) succeeded in just that. He was by all accounts a brilliant negotiator. Dreaming of a resurgent Latin Empire, he was instrumental behind the scenes in the formation of the European Economic Community and encouraged de Gaulle to block British membership. If nothing else, Kojève was a living testimony to the mesmerizing power of personality. Even Aron was taken in by Kojève. Although he noted that in 1938–1939, Kojève referred to himself as a *strict Stalinist*, Aron believed that Kojève later abandoned his Stalinism for the sake of serving France. Did there, Aron asks, remain in him a kind of Russian patriotism, hidden and rationalized? I don’t doubt it, although there is no question that he served the French nation, freely chosen, with unshakable loyalty.

It turns out, though, that Kojève was unshakably loyal only to the Hegelian ideal of the World Historical Personality. The young Hegel idolized Napoleon when he was on his way up, referring to him in 1806 as *diese Weltseele*—*this world soul*. Stalin was Kojève’s Napoleon: a tyrant through whom the forces of history seemed to converge. The French government has not yet released Kojève’s dossier, so it is not clear how much damage he did in his decades of espionage. He was the confidante of de Gaulle and Giscard d’Estaing, and doubtless had access to numerous French secrets. As Mr. Johnson points out, this “miraculous mandarin turns out to have been a malevolent mole. Nobody of his eminence has ever been exposed as a traitor on this scale before.” The French, though they have exposed Kojève, have yet to condemn him. Perhaps that is a sign of the lingering influence of his ideas. If it is true that we are at the dawn of the *post-historical* era, then working as a spy for the greatest tyranny of the twentieth century might be able to be dialectically interpreted as a *progressive* gesture. Then, too, many of the people Kojève worked with are still alive. Honest condemnation might be embarrassing or worse. And after all, Kojève was universally admired for his beguiling brilliance. For our part, the saga of Alexandre Kojève’s treachery reminds us of Walter Bagehot’s comment on Ruskin’s harebrained economic ideas: “In the faculty of writing nonsense, stupidity is no match for genius.” Bagehot might have added: In the faculty of perpetrating evil, common sense is no match for the Hegelian dialectic.