

“Intelligentsia”: The Vanished Concept and its Aftermath

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1. Preliminary notes

Yuri Levada and his team took a keen interest in the Russian intelligentsia. Their ongoing research was stimulated by the need to identify those forces that can initiate changes in the Soviet system and transform it into a more open and democratic society. In this context, the intelligentsia was reputed to be an elite group capable of articulating new moral and behavioral norms, disseminating them throughout society, and influencing the most receptive social strata. This outlook, consistent with the traditional view of the intelligentsia in Russia, comports with the well-known model of “transmitting ideas” in social and cultural anthropology, as well as with the models of sociocultural change found in the works of Abraham Moles and Norbert Elias’ theory of the “civilizing process.” Empirical sociological studies that we conducted before and during perestroika and its aftermath lent credibility to this approach. Between 1985-1990, the consolidation of national elites in republics of the Soviet Union had been facilitated by the flurry of publications in national languages. In Russia, informal public associations spearheaded by scientists, teachers, journalists, writers, artists, and other members of the intelligentsia facilitated a similar transformation.

Public opinion polls, made possible after the founding of VCIOM (the Russian Public Opinion Research Center), demonstrated that the vector of change was directed by the most advanced societal groups – highly educated young residents of major Russian cities demanding institutional reforms, the foremost of which were ending the Communist Party’s monopoly and establishing a market economy. After the collapse of the USSR, the mass support for political reforms of Gaydar’s government, which was led chiefly by academics and political scientists, gave more weight to this interpretation. However, at the end of 1991, doubts as to whether the intelligentsia was really “the elite” arose, with the doubts increasing through this decade (Gudkov, Dubin, 1991, pp. 97-99). It soon became clear that the “intelligentsia,” or the educated class, finding itself incapable of putting the proclaimed course of reforms into practice, was yielding leadership to the former Communist/Soviet or economic nomenklatura (now operating under a different name).

This forced us to reconsider the interpretation of the intelligentsia as the “elite.” In the standard sociological definition of “elite,” this category is identified as fulfilling three main social functions: *symbolic*, *normative* (integration), and *goal setting*. Each time the issue of “true elite” comes up – whether we talk about aristocrats, patrician bourgeoisie, rational bureaucrats, professional political leaders of parliamentary parties, or other types, attention is directed not only to the values they espouse but also to its member’s ability to cooperate with other groups, strata, and classes. This function of elites presupposes a society with the separation of powers, an independent judicial system, a government operating under rule of law, and human rights. The authority of the elite is grounded in its performance, which is judged to be exemplary (in moral or status/class terms) or efficient in achieving goals (the “best” solutions in business, politics, academia, art, and sports). In other words, the influence of the elite in modern society is based on their function, or the ability to represent symbolically society in its diverse achievements. Education is an important feature of “elitism,” but not the only or decisive feature that sets an “elite” apart. For the intelligentsia, by contrast, the educational achievement is a defining trait.

The semantics of “intelligentsia” and “elite” defer in important respects. To begin with, the concept of intelligentsia presupposes a society that is rigid, amorphous, and passive, that contains an undifferentiated population held together by sovereign authorities, chiefly by the bureaucracy and the police. Change in such a society occurs only at the behest of government and in the interest of the state, i.e., as “a revolution from above.” The intelligentsia’s role in this scheme of things is to enlighten the population and help people articulate their interests, which they are deemed to be incapable of understanding on their own. The intelligentsia’s primary

function is to raise awareness of the right or fair organization of the state, which according to this paternalistic outlook is the only agency with the power to order citizens' lives justly. Endemic to this approach is the notion that change doesn't come piecemeal, that a complete overhaul of the corrupt and inapt government is required to bring about a just society. This change is to be accomplished by the intelligentsia seizing the initiative from bureaucracy and acting as its antithesis. Thus, the concept of intelligentsia is built on a highly negative attitude toward the state and authority, and it furnishes no apparent means for implementing its lofty mission.

Characteristically, the discourse about intelligentsia bypasses the question of what social interests and classes should drive social change, which intellectual, institutional, or cultural resources the intelligentsia could deploy to ensure that the masses receive and assimilate its ideas. The intelligentsia's influence is not contingent on its political or social savvy as much as on its capacity to spread "enlightenment," to increase the overall number of educated people and instill "cultured" habits in the general population. Promoting literacy, enlarging the reading public, increasing attendance in theaters and museums, these are the signs by which the intelligentsia measures its impact on society and gauges the progress toward cultural amelioration.

In and of itself, however, a growth in the number of educated people unaccompanied by structural changes doesn't bring about the desired results. Indeed, the last ten years of Putin's regime revealed the opposite trend: a marked increase in the number of people with higher education diplomas coincided with the strengthening of centralized power and the emergence of a dictatorship unconstrained by checks and balances, unresponsive to society, propped up by the mass culture of urban consumers satisfied with themselves, their lives and their "national leader" whose militaristic policies and imperial rhetoric of "Russian revival" keep the country enthralled. The swelling numbers of such "*intelligent*" – Solzhenitsyn called this group *obrazovanshchina* or educationally half-baked – demanded a certain level of respect, and when this respect failed to materialize, they succumbed to a compensatory traditionalism and anti-Western resentment – a toxic mix which played into Putin's authoritarianism.

Discussions about the intelligentsia in Russia are cyclical in nature, dying down and flaring up with new force at certain historical junctures. The current interest in this topic is symptomatic: it points to social stagnation, rigid state rule, weakened civil society, and diminishing opportunities for political participation. By the same token, interest in the intelligentsia falls sharply when a repressive system disintegrates.

From a sociological vantage point, the "intelligentsia" is an appellative structure invoked by a group claiming an identity as the national elite. The concept includes firstly the idea of its presumptive mission as an agent of change and secondly the criticism of and opposition to a government bureaucracy unable to carry out the desired changes or resisting undesirable ones. Faith in their mission is a unifying principle that attracts well-educated people who tout their social and moral convictions as superior to the official ones. Occupations in which *intelligent* are employed – they can be businessmen, merchants, officials, landlords, IT workers, or *raznochintsy*¹ – have no apparent connection to the vaunted qualities claimed by the intelligentsia.

As an ideological concept, "intelligentsia" is tethered to the myth of modernization in an authoritarian country achieved by moral people with academic knowledge, preoccupied with the "fate of the country," and capable of discerning a path of national development. Political participation is downplayed here. The struggle centers on the "enlightenment" of the forces vital to the country's future – "the government" or "the people." This myth explains several things simultaneously; it articulates the relationship between a country bound for modernization and its counterparts, frames the agenda of the ruling class, explains the nation's social structure and its

¹ Originally, this term was used in imperial Russia to designate people of miscellaneous rank. "In essence, the elite groups of the "intelligentsia type" was consolidated around symbols, and the bureaucratic one – around their official positions." (Levada, 2007, p.8)

internal connections, and it nourishes the hope for a better future by invoking an ideal or proximate model achieved in another, usually “European,” state.

This myth structures the social space and time, providing a framework for the self-definition of educated people who set themselves apart from general population while aspiring for “modernity, prosperity, and progress.” The semantics of “intelligentsia” are not made up of easily discernible characteristics associated with social or professional groups or institutions. The virtual structure of such a collective identity precludes the institutional codification of elite functions and roles. If we begin to apply this concept to institutional relationships and treat the intelligentsia as a social stratum or “*sotsialynaya prosloyka*” of workers, as it was designated in Soviet textbooks, then we end up with the bureaucracy, a hierarchical social organization subservient to the authorities and fulfilling an easily definable function of perpetuating the system rule. An attempt study the gap between the intelligentsia’s self-appointed role and its actual functions, to examine this “ersatz elite’s” multiple failures, meets resistance from the educated majority anxious to preserve its exalted identity.

2. In search of the “elite”

The collapse of the USSR dealt a blow to the status that the intelligentsia had secured in the 1960s-80s when it oscillated between servility and accommodation to the authorities. Public opinion polls, conducted by the Levada Center since 1988, show that the intelligentsia lost its authority in society with the onset of Yeltsin’s reforms and with it the ability to control the media and influence the government.² Amidst all the social changes following the fall of communism, the disappearance of intelligentsia went largely unnoticed.

Conversations about the Soviet intelligentsia display a fallacy common to retrospective examinations. Characters belonging to a specific time are removed from their historical context and reinterpreted in hindsight from the vantage point of subsequent history (frequently, in light of the group’s demise) and with the benefit of knowledge unavailable to their peers. We need to bear in mind the problematic tendency to judge the intelligentsia as a group based on the actions of a few, with the moral and intellectual achievements of specific individuals credited to the entire group. In the process, the virtual majority is endowed with exceptional qualities and anthropomorphic features such as “conscientiousness,” “responsiveness,” “humanity,” and “spirituality.” The concept of the “intelligentsia” is overloaded with connotations, reflecting the illusions and prejudices of various groups and times. Throughout all the fluctuations in semantics however, the concept of intelligentsia has retained a core set of values associated with “reason,” “understanding,” “knowledge,” “morals,” “culture,” and “authority” – characteristics claimed by those who position themselves as members of the “intelligentsia” and “people of culture.” To a large extent, these ideas reflect the epigonic reception of the European Enlightenment and education.³ As such precepts got assimilated, they were simplified and harnessed to the bureaucratic needs of “educating the people.” It was this circumstance, the necessity of acting as

² In 1995, 55% of Russians polled believed that the intelligentsia proper had disappeared, that it had ceased to fulfill its role as a moral critic of power, after having made too many compromises with the country’s new leadership and with business. In a list of influential public forces and institutions, the intelligentsia comes in second to last (the first five spots occupied by the president, church, army, Federal Security Service (FSB), and the oligarchs) (*Obshchestvennoye mneniye v 2016 godu* [Public opinion in 2016], p. 84, table 9.1.1). Over the post-Soviet years, only 17% of Russians felt that the intelligentsia had retained its value (an assessment made primarily by those who considered themselves members of that group).

³ The appearance of a social/moral group assuming responsibility for accelerating the Westernization of the homeland is found in many countries striving to catch up to modernization. Russia was but the first to take this historical road.

intermediaries between the state and the people that created the illusion of “intelligentsia” as a distinct social group.⁴ Try to describe the 19th century “intelligentsia” as a social group, and you will end up emptyhanded.

We can separate the problem from its ideological veneer only by considering the position and function of educated groups in Russia in a system of changing institutional frameworks – institutions for the production of educated society.⁵ The ideological concept of the “intelligentsia” surfaced in an age when Russia was coming to grips with the rise of nationalism. Hence, the fascination with Russian “people,” “culture,” “literary culture” (1829), “society,” and “history” understood as something other than dynastic chronicles – all the ideas that were borrowed from European philosophy. These intellectual movements were driven, in part, by an awareness of the educated segments of the Russian nobility that their country didn’t fare well after the “Patriotic” War with Napoleon. This effort to make sense of the extremely contradictory relationship with Europe continued throughout the 19th century and it is still evident today. On one hand, the imaginary “Europe” (France, Germany, England) served as a source of cultural and civilizational models for the government and the nobility. They were used as a guide to efficient governance in the areas of law, art, literature, university education and armed forces, with the “West” acquiring a special status as a model and measuring rod for assessing Russian identity and self-worth. On the other hand, the question remained as to whether it is possible to recreate at home achievements originating abroad without succumbing to the “harmful” ideas such as free thought, republicanism, and atheism, which threatened the traditional system of autocracy and state serfdom.

Under the rigid rule of patrimonial bureaucracy (“the administration” in the language of the 19th century), two connected semantic structures arose, each one with strong rhetorical potential. The Russia-Europe nexus was one, the state-people-intelligentsia triangle was the other.⁶ These multivalent elements encompass the range of the subsequent intellectual

⁴ It was in this form that the concept of “intelligentsia” (which P. Boborykin claimed to have invented in 1866 as a moniker for “the most highly educated, cultured, and advanced stratum of society”) came to prominence in the editorials and philosophical essays of the second half of the 19th and start of the 20th century. S. O. Shmidt has shown, however, that V. A. Zhukovsky used the word “intelligentsia” in a very similar meaning in his diaries as early as 1829. (“The best Petersburg nobility...who represent all the Russian European intelligentsia” (Zhukovsky, 1994). In Zhukovsky’s words (as in Boborykin’s definition) the combination of three semantic elements, which later became constitutive for the entire topic of the Russian elite and Russian culture: “Russian + European” = “best”/ “advanced” + “aristocratic,” although not by birth – by their “spirit,” people chosen for their achievements).

⁵ “To define social strata and groups as elites, we need indicators such as social resources (possession of special knowledge, benefits, opportunities for influence, access to power), a defined separation from other groups (prestige, ‘the chosen ones’), the nature of their activities, functions (supporting order, reproducing models, adaptation or resistance to change)... The most important aspect in definitions of “elite status” isn’t a description of the members making up those groups, but the nature of their actions, their regulating, moral, and symbolic components, “idols” and myths...” (Levada 2007, p. 4)

⁶ “References to the “West” as an ideal of achievement and as a synonym for a specific kind of “modernity” gives rise to a double consciousness of the present: one represents the cultural norm for the assessment of the other, tied to it and demonstratively in relation to it. <...> This system could be deemed “The Past in the Future,” i.e., what should be in the “past” from the point of view of the “future.” But the same can be said of the “future,” seen from the viewpoint of “what has already happened.” This type of structure strips all meaning from the very idea of culture [in the German sense of the word – per Adelung or Kant, as the subjective ability and efforts toward self-improvement by an individual or people]” and negates the

movements, which engendered Russia's *neurosis of identity*. This neurosis stems from a strenuous attempt to reconcile contradictory ideas. Russia was acknowledged to be backward and at the same time billed as a country destined for greatness; vital modernization was linked to the West yet denounced as foreign to native soil; the state was trusted to preserve "tradition" and simultaneously to effect change; and progress as directed from above while bodied forth by the people.

The self-definition of the European-educated strata induced a feeling of "guilt" vis-à-vis the "people," self-doubts about "being rootless" and "lost."⁷ The desire to shed the collective (national) inferiority complex and to find the basis for a *positive identity*, for national pride and self-respect, necessitates liberating Russia from its dependence on Europe, from being "blinded by the West," as K. Aksakov put it (Aksakov, K.S., Aksakov, I.S., p. 30⁸). The basis for this transformation is found either in myths of a Great Empire and its "glory bought with blood" (used to justify the power-vertical) or in fantasies about the distant past of Rus' (linked to the utopia of *obshchina* – "commune"). The future may transpire as an idealized Western European (read "lawful") state, as socialist projects, or combination of the two. The quest for Russia's "special path" for its incomparable worth as a "unique civilization" defines the identity of the elite and the rhythm of changes in the Russian cultural traditions, as well as the alternating short periods of openness to the world and long ones of closed-off isolationism. Archaic as it might seem, this subject is still relevant today.

Holistic sentiments animating the "state-people-intelligentsia" triangle leave no room for *separate* social interests, either in the sense of class or in terms of professional groupings. In this reckoning, the independence from the state – subjective autonomy – is equated with individualism or collective selfishness. That is why the logic of the "intelligentsia" does not include the ideas of political representation or civil society. The image of "indivisible whole" predominates.

The modest modernization that started in Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries focused primarily on military, technological, and educational institutions. It was initiated by the government, which was forced after serious military defeats (e.g., the Crimean war, the Russo-Japanese war of 1905) to conduct institutional reforms for the sake of saving the Empire. The swiftly formed entrepreneurial class, no longer in need of legitimization from the educated class, played a special role in this process. The restrictions the government placed on authorized changes ensured the perennial tension between the absolute power of a centralized bureaucracy and the rootless intelligentsia, the latter taking as its "mission the task of breaking the ideological foundation of patriotic conservatism and planting the fruits of European progress on Russian soil" (Levada, 2007, p. 7).⁹ As this confrontation escalated, it produced the revolution, which left

importance of the present, of the actual structures of social relations, interests, and ideas that people are governed by in their daily lives. (Gudkov, Dubin, 1986, p. 216)

⁷ "The development of all independent peoples started from a, shall we say, domestic foundation; their works, even after reaching a certain degree of perfection and therefore joining the category of worldwide human achievements, did not lose their distinctive character. Russia received everything from the outside; that is the basis for this sense of ourselves as imitators; calling forth not wonder, but subservience, from the talented; that is the reason for the complete absence of any freedom or true work.... The beginning and the cause behind the slowness of our achievements in enlightenment was the very swiftness with which Russia adopted the outer form of education and erected an illusory building of literature without any foundation, without the exertion of any internal forces." (Venevitinov, 1825/1956, p. 210-211)

⁸ See also: I. Shevelenko (2017, p. 210-21).

⁹ See also: M.A. Davydov. *Za 20 let do Velikoy voyny. Russkaya modernizatsiya Vitte-Stolykina*. [Twenty years before the Great War. The Russian modernization of Witte and Stolypin.] St. Petersburg, Aleteya, 2016, p. 841-882.

intact the vertical power structure. With the structural-functional differentiation of Russian society blocked, the emancipation of society from the government had also stalled.

3. The formation of the Soviet intelligentsia: particular features of this “social layer”

With the Bolsheviks in power, the intelligentsia quickly lost its relevance. This precipitous fall from grace happened even before the authorities began to wage a systematic war on the intelligentsia.¹⁰ Any differentiation between the “intelligentsia” and “bureaucracy” disappeared. The Soviet intelligentsia was enfolded into the bureaucracy built around the state and party nomenklatura. The question why the Soviet civil servants continued to identify with the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia is an interesting one, but this is a topic for a separate study. The Soviet “society-state” with the party nomenklatura at its core penetrated all spheres of social, economic, and daily life, setting the ideological frameworks for development and defining class elements in the selection of staff and their training. With some reservations, we can single out three periods and, correspondingly, three types of Soviet “intelligentsia”: post-revolutionary, Stalinist, and Krushchev-Brezhnevist.

After 1917, the word “intelligentsia” took on a clearly negative, class-tinged meaning evident in clichés like “the rotten bourgeois intelligentsia.” The construction of a “new society” and the formation of a “new Soviet man” necessitated the symbolic and physical destruction of the old elite and its institutions, which was carried out through show trials of the 1920s and early 1930s (the “industrial party trial,” the “trial of the academics”).

Toward the end of the 1920s, conditions grew more complicated. The continuing persecution of “fellow travelers” and “specialist vermin” did not obviate the state’s need for experienced administrators, manufacturing specialists, transportation managers, and so on. The catastrophic decline in the competency of administrative personnel under the new regime reflected several historical factors such as the rapid decrease in the already thin layer of educated people during the First World War, the adverse impact of civil wars, the devastation brought by the Red Terror, and mass emigration following the Bolshevik Revolution.¹¹

A deficit of technical personnel forced the Soviet leadership to reconsider its previous policies in the educational sphere, almost entirely destroyed by the authorities in the first half of the 1920s.¹² A series of decisions by the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party

¹⁰ “Now that 12 years of revolution have passed, I ask myself: who am I? Who have I become. I am a member of the Russian intelligentsia. This term was invented in Russia. Out in the world there are doctors, writers, political figures. Here we have a specialization – intelligentsia. That’s a person who struggles with doubts, suffers, splits himself in two, takes on blame, repents, and knows exactly what a feat is, what is conscience, etc. I dream of no longer being one of them” (Y. Olesha, 1930/1999, p. 55).

¹¹ The percentage of the population with a university education in Imperial Russia at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries did not exceed 2 per-mil.

¹² The purges of universities in 1924-25 and the repressive policies of the Soviet government toward non-proletarian groups led to a sharp reduction in the total number of universities (by more than half), and the precipitous drop in the number of students (by 28-40%). The annual output of universities during the NEP period amounted to an average of 24,000 specialists. In 1924, the percentage of *leaders* of industry with a higher education was only 21% (most of them had completed a two-year degree after completing “workers’ school”). Even among *specialists* in industry, the percentage of workers with a higher education had gone from 30% to 24% by the end of NEP. The “workerfication” of administrative personnel and specialists meant swift career growth for representatives of groups with minimal cultural resources but maximum loyalty to the regime. (Gudkov, 2004, p. 714)

of Bolsheviks at the start of the 1930s were intended to develop a program to restore national schooling and create a system of higher education to build the Soviet intelligentsia that was ideologically aligned with and loyal to the party.¹³

The new system was meant to quickly turn out qualified administrative personnel, which meant a unified standard education. But even these tasks required a significant amount of time. Higher education became a system which could process a significant number of students, anti-elite and pragmatic in spirit, in line with Stalin's 1929 call to "reach and overtake" America in manufacturing and industrial production.

The majority of the new managers replacing the old elite either perished in WWII or disappeared in political purges of the second half of the 1930s-1940s.

After the war, the system of education started on a slow path towards restoration. The regime of complete isolation from the outside world ("the fortress under siege") was combined with the campaign to rout internal and external enemies and stamp out cosmopolitanism. Another political idea, which began to gain prominence at this period, was the USSR as the leader and foundation of a new global system equal to European or Western civilization. Ideological campaigns reached the point of parody with calls to resist "genuflecting before the West." At this time we also see concerted efforts to spur scientific discoveries and inventions, and on the cultural front – to establish the cult of the Russian classics. The 1940s-1950s, a period of total bureaucratization of literature, science, and cultural life, gave rise to an atmosphere of fear, cynicism, and subservience of the intelligentsia towards authority. These years saw a surge in Russian chauvinism or nationalism, which would be cyclically reprised a generation later under Brezhnev, and once again under Vladimir Putin.

4. The Soviet "intelligentsia" from Khrushchev to perestroika and beyond

Significant changes began only after Stalin's death when Nikita Khrushchev commenced his policy of de-Stalinization. The Cold War, arms race, and later the space race required not only a substantial number of qualified engineers, designers, and researchers, but also a degree of openness to global achievements in science and technology. At the end of the 1950s-early 1960s, a series of academic institutions were founded (the Central Math and Economics Institute, sociological research centers, and groups in system research, etc.). The number of those accepted into universities grew, as did the selection of universities available to students. As academic faculties expanded and new departments opened up, scientific and academic journals proliferated. Of particular interest is the emergence of periodic publications devoted to historical and philosophical studies, journals specializing in popular science and youth-themed subjects. This development changed the structure of communication within educated society, which had far-reaching consequences for the revival of intelligentsia.

In 1963, the last year of Khrushchev's tenure in office, the Soviet administration made two important policy decisions: the first to sharply increase spending on education and science (the largest percentage of the GDP allocated to science and education in the entire Soviet and post-

¹³ The resolution of the Central Committee of the USSR of 09.19.1932 "On the regime in higher education" and subsequent decisions by the CC of the party. By 1935, applicants to universities had tripled in comparison with 1928. Among university students, 42% studied industrial and technical specialties, 24% – pedagogical, 13% – agronomic, veterinary, and other agricultural specializations, and the same percentage were studying to be doctors, 8% studied social and economic subjects, etc. This distribution speaks to the fact that the primary needs of the state were for two types of specialists – engineers and teachers, which corresponds to the extreme and primitive condition of a society that had survived a social catastrophe and lost its institutions of reproduction. (Gudkov, *ibid*, p. 717)

Soviet era), and the second to introduce a national system of compulsory secondary education. The leadership recognized that mass and higher education was key to achieving the large-scale technological breakthroughs necessary for maintaining the nation's status as a superpower, particularly in the military sector and space industry.

These decisions stimulated an interest in higher education, increasingly seen as a platform for upward social mobility. Investments in education gradually changed the social structure: the percentage of those with a higher education among the working population rose from 1% in the 1950s to 3% by the end of the 1960s-early 1970s and continued to increase thereafter.¹⁴ By the time Gorbachev came onto the scene, this figure had reached 8-10%, which stimulated the demands for college and university degrees and increased the loyalty to the regime. This development had a negative side as well: the "overabundance" of educated people with no clear professional prospects and chances to improve their quality of life triggered "stagnation," the feeling of living in a societal swamp, of being part of a decaying regime, which in turn fed the unfocused desire for change.

After the war, the composition of university classes notably changed. Fresh high school graduates were joined by war veterans, people with completely different life experiences, some hobbled by PTSD, and they all came into close contact. The intermingling of these two generational streams gave rise to a unique cohort identified in Russia as "the 60s generation." It is this generation that brought down the totalitarian system, without necessarily intending to do so, and assumed the mantle of intelligentsia. To the end of Soviet regime, this educated strata remained dogmatic in its thinking, cynical in its ideological outlook, and corrupt in its practices.

The culture of the Soviet intelligentsia developed simultaneously with criticism of Stalin's "cult of personality" as justification for the reproduction of the bureaucracy, which was trying to emancipate itself from ideological control and party pressure. Khrushchev's "Thaw" and the feeble liberalization it engendered resulted from the struggle for power between Stalin's heirs – the KGB apparatus, the entrenched propaganda machine, the censorship institutions. The subsequent expulsion of staunch Stalinists from the highest circle of leadership helped the liberalization process. In time, Khrushchev consolidated his power by promoting his followers to the administrative apparatus. Notice that the literary figures or reform-minded party functionaries who sided with Khrushchev were less concerned with exposing Stalin's mistakes than with denouncing the "excesses" of the Soviet system. Among the topics now open to public discussion were the government's responsibility for the defeats during the first years of the war, the mass casualties and ruthless waste of troops, the collusion between Stalin and Hitler, the disastrous state of the countryside after the forced collectivization and dekulakization, the resultant famine, and the lack of responsibility at all levels of government. Questions about the cost of World War II and the Soviet victory that prolonged Stalinism, assumed key importance.

Even though these discussions left unchallenged the Communist Party's deadly hold on power, they had serious consequences for Russia society, in part because they coincided with a generational shift. The younger generation was only partially affected by war yet keenly aware of repressions their parents had faced. That is why calls for "socialism with a human face" came not from the war generation but from the one that followed. The intelligentsia of the 60s was recruited chiefly from those born in 1925-1935.

¹⁴ Changes in the percentage of the employed population with a higher education over the course of the 20th century in Russia: in 1912 - 0.15-0.2%, 1928 - 0.2%, 1939 - 0.6%, 1951 - 1%, 1959 - 2%, 1969 - 3%, 1979 - 8%, 1989 - 13%, 1996-1997 - 19%. (Gudkov, 1999)

As long as this intelligentsia continued to serve the nomenklatura (training personnel, justifying the state and its policies, overseeing censorship, providing technological support to state administrators), its members occupied important positions in the social hierarchy and enjoyed a certain level of respect in society as carriers of specialized knowledge. The ability to defend their autonomy and independence from the state had less to do with the intelligentsia's exalted view of its mission to mediate between the state and the people, defend the socially disadvantaged, spread education throughout society, preserve the cultural heritage than with access to specialized knowledge and hold on skills useful to effective administration.

Only a minute portion of the intelligentsia genuinely believed in and fought for the freedom of speech and conscience. The corporate interests predominated. The reforms championed by the intelligentsia were instrumental in securing its status, authority, and prestige, along with tangible privileges, material benefits, bonuses and awards. Servile by habit, the intelligentsia also hungered to be "teachers of life" who embodied the "conscience of the nation," a status generally accorded posthumously. Although high culture reinforced the importance of independent thinking, it also promoted conformism, doublethink, and the tendency to rationalize one's failure. This duality helped the intelligentsia adapt to a totalitarian regime, teaching its members how to observe the boundaries of what was permissible and what was not. To be recognized by the state, the intelligentsia had to surrender the freedom of thought and agree to serve the interests of the power vertical. Regardless of the justifications for this abandonment of the principles espoused by the "old" Russian intelligentsia – the preservation of cultural values, mediation between the state and the people, the elementary desire to survive – this stance amounted to a total ideological and moral capitulation, which undermined the intelligentsia's claims to be a harbinger of the future. The transformation of "creators" into civil servants put an end to the historic struggle between the intelligentsia and the bureaucracy" (Levada, 2007, p. 13). Yet this very duality of intelligentsia culture has helped society maintain a certain moral framework, which has been rapidly eroding since the end of that culture in the 90s. If the open polarization of political forces didn't kill off the intelligentsia, it at least put it into a comatose state. The "doers" capable of practical action came to the fore: the technocrat politicians, the experts, and later, political strategists, entrepreneurs, and managers, i.e., specialists whom the government could trust to create new institutional structures and implement policies favored by the national leadership. Researchers, teachers, and lab supervisors – these pragmatic intellectuals would eventually go into business and become captains of the market economy (B. Berezovsky, V. Gusinsky, P. Aven, K. Bendukidze, D. Zimin, etc.).

The educated community of practitioners openly distanced itself from the Soviet intelligentsia, insisting that they were intellectuals, specialists, professionals doing real jobs and helping build civil society and dismantle the totalitarian system. With reforms gathering speed, intellectuals trained in the humanities took to complaining about the mass culture, the rise of consumerism, and the market economy undermining their social standing. A far larger contingent of techies and engineers, on the other hand, played a different tune, voicing their strong support for perestroika and capitalist markets. It wasn't just a looming threat of unemployment and the prospects of losing one's authority that alarmed the intelligentsia; it was also the real crisis – a collapse of the entire system undergirding the intelligentsia and its culture. The government reforms carried out by Gaidar's team and the critical drop in state revenues during the transition period lead to a sharp reduction in the financing of education, medicine, science, and the army. Academic and government research institutions and engineering departments, often connected with the defense industry, were running out of funds, their staff barely surviving without work and forced to take unpaid vacations.

The Soviet intelligentsia, as it turned out, existed only so long as the Soviet government remained in power. When the latter disintegrated, this group of self-appointed elites suffered intellectually and morally. In time, this group disappeared altogether, leaving behind a space filled with disillusion, cynicism, and resentment. We need to bear in mind one more momentous

development. When the state organization of culture ended, the ties between the center and the periphery were severed, and the mechanisms of cultural transmission from the bearers of high culture to the intellectually and morally dependent recipient groups broke.

Case in point – the collapse of the literary culture with its network of “thick journals,” a redoubt of the intelligentsia’s power. In closed societies, a centralized journal system does more than regulate internal group dynamics – policing the entrance into the field, determining what counts as “classics,” framing in literary term urgent issues. Thick journals also set up cultural standards, facilitated inter-group communication, and tied the center with the periphery by disseminating symbolic resources. The change came gradually, and its unanticipated consequences took time to discern.

The circulation of the leading social/literary journals soared during the several years of Gorbachev’s glasnost, from the end of 1986 to 1991 (those of “liberal” journals jumped 4-9 times higher, and those of “*pochvenny*”¹⁵ journals multiplied by 1.2-1.5 times). *Novy Mir*, for example, had a limited subscriber base and circulation of 160,000 before perestroika. After the publication of works by Solzhenitsyn, Bulgakov, Nabokov, Platonov, and other previously banned authors, circulation jumped to 3.5 million copies. After *Znamya* published Rybakov’s “The Children of Arbat” and kindred perestroika-themed works, its circulation went from 140,000 to one million copies. *Druzhba Narodov* saw a similar increase in demand, its annual output rising from 120,000 to 850,000.¹⁶ Samizdat stimulated this explosive growth in the journal market, as did “tamizdat” – Russian-language publications abroad. Another important factor was the emergence of critical journalism, which became an instrument for the rapid education of the public on basic concepts of economics, law, statistics, and best administrative practices (articles by N. Shmelev, V. Selyunin, and others).

But the journal boom yielded unexpected results. With several years (1987-1992) of pumping out the most famous texts from samizdat and foreign literature, the journals destroyed the mechanism guiding the reproduction of literary culture. Literary and social criticism, once vital for establishing a work’s aesthetic and social relevance, were drastically cut back. What was the point of reviewing Nabokov’s *Lolita* or *The Gift*, Chevengur by Platonov, or *Life and Fate* by V. Grossman? Their iconic status as timeless treasures of world literature and Russian classics invited no reassessment.¹⁷

Meanwhile, journalists were leaving journals for newspapers, radio, and TV – the best platform for free expression and trend setting. The dramatic events of those years required rapid coverage and immediate, if superficial, reaction. The authority of the media rose precipitously in those years, declining only after Putin started his purge of the mass media market in the 2000s. Yet, there was no analysis, no in-depth social, historical, moral, or philosophical reflection on the past or present processes. Why? Because the intelligentsia was ill prepared to face the change. Its practitioners had no serious theoretical, practical, or organizational models for gauging or directing reforms, no reform plans waiting to be pulled out of the desk drawers. That is why

¹⁵ *Pochvennichestvo*, or “return to the soil” was a movement in 19th century Russia whose ideals were close to that of the Slavophiles, but with a more patriotic, church-based, and anti-intellectual ideology.

¹⁶ The growth in subscription, and, therefore, publication of these journals was even greater in Russia’s two capitals: in Moscow and Leningrad, the publication of *Druzhba Narodov* increased 17 times, *Znamya* – 4.6 times, *Novy Mir* – 2 times (Gudkov, Dubin, 1994, p. 328). Conservative journals covered the existing deficit in their own way; the *pochvenny*/nationalist journal *Moskva*, for example, achieved an enormous audience and circulation, printing issue after issue of *The History of the Russian State* by Nikolai Karamzin for almost two years (first published in 1816 – 1829, it could hardly be called a cutting-edge literary work).

¹⁷ As a result, an entire generation of writers and critics with unique voices and experiences didn’t get access to publishers. A generation hobbled by arrested development, they failed to find their readers and interlocutors.

attempts at de-communization – the trial of the Communist Party, the lustration process – had failed, along with efforts to implement institutional reforms in the legal, educational, and other spheres.

The boom in thick journals died as quickly as it sprouted (Gudkov, 1991). Between 1992 and 1995, the circulations of top publications – *Novy Mir*, *Znamya*, *Druzhiba Narodov*, *Molodaya Gvardia*, *Moskva*, *Nash Sovremennik* – fell to 3,000-7,000 copies annually. The readership of popular science publications from the perestroika period – *Nauka i Zhizn*, *Znanie – sila*, *Khimiya i Zhizn*, and the like – declined even more. As these disappeared, they took with them mass channels for production and dissemination of information on which the intelligentsia relied for generations. With the support of readers dwindling, literature lost its social importance (Gudkov, 1998, p. 88 – 100). Russian cinema faced a similar plight, as the connections between academic research and the educated publics were severed. Once banned by the censors and ideological strictures, the lowbrow mass culture, Russian Orthodox propaganda, and new-age spirituality rushed in to fill the void.

The transition to mass media culture was accompanied by drop in the intellectual, cultural and moral tone of public discourse. The lack of authority figures made that process inescapable. Once the favorite self-identifier of educated people, the “intelligentsia” now has currency chiefly in the lower layers of the peripheral reproductive bureaucracy – among librarians, provincial schoolteachers, and university instructors with salaries consistent with their diminished social status, at least in the eyes of public opinion. Clinging to their former identity as a stratum entrusted with a vital societal mission served as a compensatory mechanism helping the unformed intelligentsia cope with the loss of prestige in society. In this light we should see the rise in the nationalist/imperialist sentiments, the spread of anti-Western views, and the mounting support of Putin’s regime. In 1991, the crisis of collective Soviet identity might have been hailed as a good omen for the emerging democracy in Russia. A few years later, it transpired as a precursor of xenophobia, isolationism, knee-jerk anti-Westernism, and the bulwark of Putin’s authoritarianism. The widespread if superficial masochism of perestroika – “we are a country of slaves,” “a black hole of history,” “an Upper Volta with missiles,” “an example to the whole world of how not to live” – was hardly a new phenomenon; it was just the latest manifestation of an imperial superiority/inferiority complex.

The difficult protracted reforms caused deep disappointment among the “democrats,” which their enemies were quick to take advantage of.¹⁸ They reinforced the old and easily digestible explanations that blamed the fall of the USSR on the sworn enemies of Russia or the Western countries that triumphed in the Cold War. On this pseudo-patriotic wave, the former KGB operatives, Yeltsin’s successors, rode to power to the dismay of the incompetent liberals concerned only with retaining the positions they assumed before Putin’s arrival. Everything else was a matter of technique. With the mass media brought under state control, public opinion was manipulated to endorse the notions of an all-powerful state; the sacred nature of government as an embodiment of collective values and the inferiority of private life unleavened by the service to the state.

The short flourishing of Russian democracy came to an end in the first decade of the new century. It was the period when the repressive state had weakened, but the totalitarian system remained intact. A more complex system of government emerged with greater potential for

¹⁸ “The reform-induced convulsions meant not only mass disappointment in democratic ideas; they also singled out the failure of the elite structure, quasi-charismatic but in practice bureaucratic, which played a divisive role in the thicket of social change. The reformers enjoyed a high degree of public trust during the most difficult turning point in 1991-1992, but did not even attempt to use that trust to build a system of civil organizations and fully operational institutions. It was quite natural, then, that the public should turn their thwarted hopes from these quasi-charismatic leaders to the bureaucrat who had acquired the reins of state power” (Levada, 2006, p. 279).

adaptation and flexibility. The foundation of its legitimacy was the traditional national inferiority complex and its counterpart, the vision of a great state and consumerist society.

The meaning of “consumerism” in the 2000s had little to do with the gratification of personal efforts, merit, innovation, or hard work. Upon closer examination we can see that today’s Russian consumer embodies the desires, motivations, and life strategies formed in the preceding era and endorsed by their parents’ generation. Consumerist values evince the suppressed or delayed hopes cherished by the parents of today’s consumers. This older generation lived under the proclaimed “norms” of socialist equality and reflected the realities of forced asceticism endemic to a command economy. Young people reaching adulthood under Putin strive to distance themselves from that generation with its memories of life “under socialism,” communal apartments, the perennial scarcity of consumer goods, looking instead towards the imaginary life gleaned from movies made in “normal countries.”

The Russian economy remains largely dependent on the government. It can hardly be called a “market” economy in the usual economic sense of the term. At the end of Yeltsin’s reign, the state controlled 26-27% of all financial and industrial assets. Today, that figure is over 70%. The corrupt distribution of state money plays a key role in the Russia’s economy, distorting the social meaning of achievement, merit, and a decent income. Conspicuous consumption serves to symbolize one’s status and express the social value of an individual. That is, it reflects social privilege and reinforces the national inferiority complex. Conspicuous consumption bespeaks a moral deficit belying a claim to an elitism based on anything other than power and privilege. A correlate of this development is the marked decline in demand for culture once touted as the ultimate value. Herein we see a mechanism working to suppress the trauma of the Soviet period and an unconscious effort to reduce a sense of national shame and anxiety. A refusal to engage with the past and its culture ensures that the future will be an endless reiteration of the present, even if it brings along higher levels of consumption. (Gudkov, Zorkaya, 2017)

Not only the lower strata but also the educated classes in Russia have been integrated by television and its latest supplement, the Internet.¹⁹ The reach of written culture has diminished drastically along with the demise of the intelligentsia. Russians read a lot less these days. Our society, particularly after the wave of patriotic euphoria swept the country following the annexation of Crimea, is characterized by a striking monotony of ideas. Sociological research shows that significant differences between social groups have eroded. In fact, today there are no fundamental differences between an attitude of a university professor and factory worker toward power, their ideas about the future, or the structure of their needs. The differences lie in the intensity of their preferences, not the nature of their needs.

Aside from the collapse of the infrastructure supporting liberal-arts education, one more factor played a role in the intelligentsia’s collapse. I am talking about the explosion in the number of people with a higher education that blurred the boundaries between the strata of the humanitarian and administrative bureaucracy. Between 1991 and 2001, the number of universities in Russia nearly doubled, from 514 to 1,115, while the number of students rose from 2.86 million to 7.05 million at the apex. The percentage of people with university degrees now stands at about 23-26%, or 33% among the employed population. This increase must have been fueled by students hailing from the social strata with few cultural resources and unburdened by the pretensions of representing “elites,” unless former KGB members and nomenklatura workers are counted as “elite.”²⁰ No missionary consciousness could have emerged in this amorphous, one-dimensional group.

¹⁹ Gudkov, Dubin, 2001, p. 31-45.

²⁰ The drastic reduction of scientific and engineering/technical personnel in academic and state institutions, design and development agencies working in the defense sector, was accompanied by the rapid growth of the service economy and employees in commercial and financial institutions and the service sector. The “intelligentsia” spheres of work – pedagogy, medicine, education, culture – have been very poorly funded throughout the post-Soviet decades. The

Receiving a higher education today has nothing to do with “serving the state or the people.” A higher education diploma certifies its holder as a member of the “paid service” class akin to public utilities workers or medical insurance clerks. The rapid growth in state and private universities and the corresponding increase in the number of university students and college graduates mirrored the proliferation of for-profit educational institutions, an antithesis to the free public education of the past. The number of “budget” or government-funded spots in universities – 47% in 2015 – has been decreasing continuously, now comprising less than half of what it used to be some two decades ago.

The numerical growth of university graduates concealed a relative and absolute decline in the quality of education. By the mid-2000s, the percentage of those enrolled as part-time students exceeded full-time university students. In the mid-90s a fair number of these “part-timers” enrolled in more than one higher education institution – the fact that points to the necessity of continuing education and retraining in an economy with a spotty job market and changing employment structure. All this is in stark contrast with the state-guaranteed employment of the Soviet era (which favored lawyers, economists, IT workers, and service providers). In the 2000s, the motivations driving education changed, with part-time (distance) education becoming the main access route to a university degree.²¹

State funding of education fell to a critical level in this period, endangering the reproduction of the entire higher education system. Youth are now losing interest in academic careers, disdaining the prospects of becoming school teachers or university instructors. This trend not only guarantees the rapid aging of the university faculty and researchers employed in scientific institutions, but also the loss of competitive standing of Russian institutions of higher learning. While the necrosis of scholarship may be less apparent in natural sciences and technical disciplines, the aging of the teaching staff in the social sciences and humanities has already produced appalling results. In the Soviet period and the decade that immediately followed, most instructors were trained in Marxist-Leninist philosophy, “scientific communism,” “the history of the Communist Party,” “political economics of socialism,” and so on. Nowadays, they position themselves as teachers of sociology, psychology, cultural studies, and political science. Given their training, one can imagine the curriculum they teach and the construction they put on the transitional period. What they offer is a mix of stale Soviet ideas and archaic concepts (e.g. Eurasianism), hastily adapted to the needs of the authoritarian state. It is of no matter that Soviet Marxism as an ideology died long before the fall of the USSR. Since Brezhnev’s time this ideology had been a cover for the revival of traditional Russian imperial nationalism, with all its

number of hospitals and clinics in Russia has decreased over the last 25 years (1990 was the last Soviet year) from 34,300 to 18,900 (a 45% drop), and so did the number of schools from 69,700 to 44,100 (42% drop). Rural schools and hospitals in sparsely populated areas were the first to drop the pretext of providing a “better service to the population.” At the same time, the number of Russian Orthodox churches skyrocketed, growing from 7,500 in 1991 to 37,000 in 2017; the number of monasteries has virtually reached pre-revolutionary levels (1,150 in 1993, and over 1,000 in 2015). The decrease in expenditures on education has forced the Ministry of Education to reduce the number of universities and students. The number of universities has been cut in half (state universities – to 428, private – to 178), while the number of students in state universities has gone from 7 million to 6.1 million in 2012, and to 4.3 million in 2018. Enrollment in private university has dropped from 1 million to 700,000. The Ministry of Science and Education plans call for freezing the enrollment until after the 2020s (Kostyuchenko, 2016).

²¹ Demand for additional certifications for people with existing higher professional educations was particularly acute. Nearly half of university graduates – 47% in 2015 – go on to work in fields other than that in which they have a university degree.

attending myths about the metaphysical Russophobia of the West, the superiority of Russians over foreigners, and so forth. In this context, the growth in Russian nationalism we have witnessed since Putin's ascent to power is completely understandable as the reaction of lower social classes to the anomic conditions that followed the Soviet collapse. The intelligentsia embracing state patriotism and indulging in "Russia's special path" rhetoric can be chalked up as the product of bitter resentments.

The thin layer of new, anti-Soviet academics and teachers in the humanities is powerless to alter this trend. Instruction in Russian universities, derivative from the European or American models, is driven by government demands to make the nation's universities competitive as quickly as possible. Naturally, such demands only widened the gap between reality and aspirations. They also have a deleterious effect on teaching history, especially the recent history of the Soviet totalitarian past. No wonder that the vast majority of Russian youth, including university students, barely know what happened in their country 20-25 years ago.²² As the faculty instills in the new generation an opportunistic morality and the unquestioning readiness to serve the state.

After the intense but short-lived mass protests of 2011-2012, the Putin administration tightened its control over educational institutions by introducing courses on the "foundations of Russian Orthodox culture" and increasing the time devoted to schooling in "patriotism." As the government brings mass media under its control as well as increasing portions of the Internet, the quality of social and intellectual life in Russia suffers. The void of ideas and the paucity of visions are filled with vengeful conservatism. The official reality reflects the interests and ideological attitudes of the lowest echelon of the Soviet nomenklatura and former members of the KGB, those born in the mid-1950s and early 1960s, the generation that lived through the Brezhnev stagnation, ideological reaction, and general demoralization of the time.

This dumbing-down of the educational system is clear in the decline of mass readership and the publishing industry. In 20 years (1985-2005), the total volume of printed literature fell by a half to two-thirds (from 1.725 billion books to 690-610 million), and the average copies per one publication fell by a factor of over 5 (from 33,800 to 6,400). At this same time, the overall number of titles rose significantly from 51,000 to 89,000 (1.75 times). In the same period the small-run publications (under 500 copies) increased by 36% in terms of titles and by 12% in terms of total copies.²³ These books made up almost half, 48.2%, of the total output of books in 2016 in terms of the number of titles, but only 2.7% of the total number of copies. Mass-market books (over 50,000 print copies) make up only 0.5% of the total number of titles, and 18% of total copies.

²² A Levada Center survey conducted in 1991 asked Russian respondents about their attitudes toward the events of August 1991 – the failure of the putsch by the Gang of Eight and the following ban of the Communist Party. It showed that 90% of Russian youth knew nothing about these momentous historical events defining the Soviet and world history. We see very similar results in surveys about Stalin, mass repressions, and the revolution (*Obshchestvennoye mneniye*, 2016, 2017, p. 253 and in passim).

²³ *Knizhnyy rynek Rossii. Sostoyaniye, tendentsii. Perspektivy*. [The book market in Russia. Conditions, trends. Prospects.] The Federal Agency for Press and Mass Media. M., 2017. <http://www.unkniga.ru/images/docs/2017/otr-dokld-kn-rynok-rossii-2016.compressed.pdf>, p. 10

Table 1

Book publishing in Russia (1985-2016)			
Year	Number of newly issued books (titles), thousand	Total number of copies, million	Total copies of one book, thousand
1985	51.1	1,725.0	33.8
1990	41.2	1,553.1	37.7
1995	33.6	475.0	14.1
2000	59.5	471.2	7.9
2001	70.3	542.3	7.7
2002	69.7	591.3	8.5
2003	81.0	702.3	8.7
2004	89.1	685.9	7.7
2005	95.5	686.0	7.2
2006	102.0	669.0	6.8
2008	123.3	760.4	6.1
2009	127.6	716.6	5.6
2010	121.7	653.8	5.4
2011	127.9	612.5	5.0
2012	116.9	540.5	4.6
2013	120.5	541.7	4.5
2014	112.1	485.5	4.3
2015	112,6	459.4	4.1
2016	117.1	446.3	3.8

In the current publishing climate, the refined readership continues to shrink, as the diversity of intellectual output grows. The number of new books on the market is impressive, however they are intended for a much narrower segment of the reading public. With the collapse of inter-group ties and communications, academic and popular criticism is drying up while interdisciplinary discussions have all but died out.

All these trends – the expansion of mass culture, the decline in mass readership, the commercialization of higher education focused less on a high-quality education and more on the formal certification of “education,” the domination of mass communication by the presidential administration, and relentless propaganda – testify to the growing homogenization of social consciousness, the slowing down of socio-cultural differentiation, and a general sterilization of social life. The rapid spread of the internet has accelerated these trends rather than helped counter the insidious onslaught of Putin’s propaganda. The accelerating transformation of Russia into a one-dimensional mass society dovetails with the regime’s authoritarian policies, which fuel yet another iteration of totalitarianism.

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