

Intelligentsia exhumed: Nationalist trends among contemporary Russian intelligentsia

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Since the late 1980s, we witnessed vigorous attempts to bury the Soviet intelligentsia along with Soviet literature. Some efforts along these lines were truly inspired (Anninsky, 1992; Yampolsky, 1991). And yet, forecasts about the imminent demise of Russian intelligentsia have proved premature. Plenty of people still identify themselves with this vaunted group. Some go out of their way to sell their services to the official authorities, to Vladimir Putin – the surprising monarch that emerged after breakup of the Soviet Union. Others, still in self-criticism mode, agitate against the reigning powers and official establishment or sport a decidedly apolitical attitude. Then there are those who enjoy a cozy relationship with the establishment and milk it to their advantage.

Structurally, the situation uncannily resembles the one that prevailed in the Soviet era (Beyrau, 1993). The notion that the *intelligent* will transform themselves into pragmatic intellectuals – a common assumption in the 1990s – didn't pan out (Kordonsky 1994). The intelligentsia is still very much with us, even though it has adapted to the circumstances.

It's been at least a hundred-fifty years since basic literacy has secured a foothold in Russia, but the conflict between faith and reason continues unabated. And the feeling appears to be winning over the intellect. In 1866, Tyutchev memorably quipped that you cannot fathom Russia without applying its unique measuring rod – *arshin* – which almost no one of my acquaintances is able to identify with any precision. Hence, the continued befuddlement on the part of those trying to understand Russia and its intelligentsia in rational terms. That Tyutchev formula – “Reason fails those who seek to fathom Russia” – still rules the day can be gleaned from the political slogan made popular in the 1996 election, “Vote with your heart.”

There is a kind of self-serving condescension lurking behind the tired wisdoms of *intelligent*: “If you have to explain, you have already failed,” “You've got to figure this out on your own,” “People won't understand if we attempt this.” Do nothing, however, excuse your idleness as virtue, and people will not only understand but also sympathize with you. The *intelligent* are more likely to get a pass for its feeble-mindedness amidst the harsh realities of Russia. Don't they love their poor country and its people? That alone should have dissuaded Lenin from complaining to Maxim Gorky that the intelligentsia “is not the nation's brain but the nation's shit” (Lenin 1919/1970).

Countering Lenin, the poet Alexander Bashlachev pointed out that it is an honorable thing to acknowledge when one behaves as an asshole. Still, it's too hasty to dismiss the intelligentsia in this summary fashion. Russian people are not that different from the rest of the world. They are no better than others, to be sure, but no worse either. As Fedor Dostoyevsky said at the funeral of Nikolai Nekrasov, he “was not above Pushkin, but not below him either.” We don't know which *arshin* Dostoyevsky used to compare the two national poets. And the poet in Russia is more than just a poet. Isn't his death a national tragedy in Russia? Perhaps not.

Few give a poet his due while he is alive – it is only after he passed away that we realize he was “the sun of the Russian poetry” that set too soon and left the intelligentsia orphaned. The natural death of an outstanding filmmaker can be experienced in our country as the demise of cinema, the death of an unjustly forgotten writer as the expiration of literature, and so on. The popular formula – “the mind refuses to accept the death of...” – implies that much. Yes, right now, in mid-June of 2018, we may be witnessing the last act of a drama in which the Russian intelligentsia comes to grips with its unrequited love for its country. Georgy Fedotov illuminated this drama of the intelligentsia (to which he belonged himself) in his famous verdict that “The intelligentsia is a group distinguished by the principled nature of its stance and the groundlessness of its principles” (Pomeranz 2017, pp. 192, 249).

Much discussed, these words led some to infer that members of the intelligentsia – the *intelligenty* – will yield to the intellectuals someday (Egorov 1994). The former embody the ideal of a Russian richly endowed with empathy, the ability to put oneself in the shoes of the suffering people or identifying with the lofty dreams of the authorities. An intellectual, by contrast, is someone using knowledge and skills to accomplish whatever technical task one is assigned to do. That's how rocket scientists and engineers working in secret government facilities operated in the Soviet Union under the watchful eyes of the C.P.S.U. and K.G.B. With the party controls gone, they have scurried far and wide to find employment in whatever county pays them more (Abrikosov 1993). Some of them continue to lose sleep over the fate of their troubled country. Which means that they haven't managed to stamp out completely their intelligentsia sensibilities.

It is all the more remarkably that some die-hard members of the intelligentsia have refused to leave their country and still dwell in Russia, feeling its pain along with their own.

There is a certain logical beauty in Fedotov's formula about the principled (i.e., somewhat imaginary) nature of the intelligentsia's task and the groundless (i.e., somewhat fictive) character of its principles. The *intelligenty* may be steeped in abstract ideas, but at least their ideas are high-minded. Yes, you serve a heartless boss, but your heart aches for a simple man, your respect for the people is genuine. Not every *intelligent* is ready to hand over one's last shirt to a needy person, but he gives piano lessons, teaches sculpture, and performs other good deeds. In the process, he gets a bad rap for being too close to the authorities – Soviet or post-Soviet. Hence, the endless self-doubt and self-criticism of the intelligentsia, its fastidious attitude toward one's reputation (Stepanyan 1993). Or at last pretensions to that effect (Nuikin 1993).

Working for K.G.B. or spouting anti-Semitic slurs used to disqualify a person from joining the ranks of intelligentsia. Humble origins, or per contra, sporting an aristocratic pedigree served to legitimize your clam to be a member of this “spiritual nobility” (Averintsev 1992). With the passing of Soviet rule, the concept of “intelligentsia” did acquire new traits (Müller 1971).¹ While books went unread in the 1990s, the weeklies and thick journals swelled with the debates about the causes behind these changes, spiritual and material (Zenkin 1992). Meanwhile, the subterranean struggle for the soul of the intelligentsia intensified. The officialdom swung into action, bidding for top talent.

At this point, the word “intelligent” began to show a certain affinity with the moniker “Intelligence Services.” Perhaps that was due to the influx of Anglo-American neologisms into Russian language, although another interpretation suggests itself. For this was the juncture when you started hearing that two hundred years after it had made its entrance on the historical scene, the intelligentsia finally owned up to its responsibilities by taking assignments as intelligence operatives, signing up as justice department attorneys, offering their expertise at manipulating individual and mass consciousness. Political technologists and prosecutors are recruited these days from smart, well-mannered people who can figure out on the fly what the authorities are up to and render their wishes with artistic panache and flair.

The Latin root of “intelligentsia” suggest rational understanding and reasoned arguments connecting people. Yet secrete servicemen in the government employ are expected to possess “passionate heart” as well. This marriage of firm principles with patriotic fervor in the present-day practitioners of the dark arts one cultivated by the Soviet secret police is typical of those determined to prosper at all costs under any regime in all circumstances.

¹ Practically unknown in Russia remain western studies devoted to the conceptual foundations of the scholarship in this area (e.g. Müller, Otto Wilhelm. *Intelligencija. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte eines politischen Schlagwortes*. Frankfurt: Athenäum Verlag, 1971).

Should the need arise to blot from the nation's memory embarrassing facts, the new intelligentsia is ready to do the job. And the need did present itself in the spring of 2014 when, tired of accusations that they help resurrect Imperial Russia, the new-breed intelligentsia set out to purge the archives of the compromising materials. The case in point – the files of the Polish officers murdered in the Katyn forest by the NKVD. First published in the late 1980s by the *Journal of History*, these files began to disappear in the last few years. A meta-document dating back to the Khrushchev's years suggests that the authorities long understood the urgency of expunging the references to the Katyn massacre. However, it took the Putin administration to carry out this plan to its logical conclusion. Where personal files of the Polish officers were once archived, researchers now find a summary statement explaining why preserving these files was not in the national interests (Shelepin 1959). Whether they work under cover as secret police or masquerade as men of the cloth, the *intelligent* friendly to the regime are eager to apply the old *arshin* to the motherland, as they angle to convince their fellow citizens that they are better off being left in the dark regarding certain facts about their nation's and their families' past.

You can't bring back your grandma anyway, so why malign the system that destroyed her? How can you build a strong Russia if you harbor dark memories about your motherland? You, the *intelligent*, should know better. Back up your state even if it hadn't always had your back.

Well, many people cooperating with the regime nowadays are thinking to themselves, "Better us doing this miserable job than some scoundrels pretending to serve their homeland. Who the hell can be sure that the U.S.S.R. had ever existed, that Solzhenitsyn didn't invent the Gulag? Archipelago on the continent, in the frozen tundra – come on! That's a mirage. And beware sordid emotions – angel's anger is the devil's work." The last sentence that Grigory Pomerantz likes to evoke harks back to Fedotov's point about the groundlessness of the intelligentsia's principles. And yet, this sentiment is more than a little self-serving.

Viktor Markovich Zhivov shows his misgiving about the intelligentsia from yet another angle. The intelligentsia's marginalizing attitudes, Zhivov tells us, is bad for the country undergoing modernization, for such attitudes beget "fake realities" infected with the intelligentsia's own complexes. To flesh out his point about the intelligentsia's self-destructive tendencies, Zhivov uses the metaphor of a snake biting its own tail.

To the old intelligentsia's excessive reflexivity and soul-searching, the nationalists juxtapose the life of commitment and decisive action. Meet V. G. Ardzinba (1945-2010), an outstanding historian, the *intelligent* as man of action. Ardzinba got himself elected as the president of Abkhazia and then led its soviet-era army in a secessionist movement that tore Abkhazia from the Republic of Georgia and brought it under the de facto control of Russia. The *intelligent* leaning toward this nationalist pole are especially eager to offer their services as political consultants, geopolitical gurus, and human technologists.

Marat Gelman, one of the most influential second-generation *intelligent*, gave a TV interview in June of 2018 where he dubbed the *intelligent* actively collaborating with the authorities and working for the state "humanitarian engineers." Even those who can't be squarely placed into this category – teachers, physicians, and so-called "state-budget dependent employees" (*biudzhetniki*) – depend on the taxpayers' money meted out by the state. True to their Soviet origins, these remnants of the old intelligentsia may spar in fierce debates in their spare-time lives while obeying the rules in public without ever attempting political actions.

Compare these adaptive responses to the Russian intelligentsia that found itself in the diaspora. The very qualities ascribed to this group back in the U.S.S.R. – internationalism, anti-racist attitudes, atheism, the cult of science, and the gospel of equality – proved to be superfluous

abroad. The moment the Soviet strictures ceased to apply, the Russian *intelligenty* abroad ditched their old convictions. Racist sentiments and rightwing rhetoric are rampant among the diaspora intelligentsia in Israel and U.S.A. Only a small part of the former Soviet intelligentsia, mostly those who managed to secure a high socio-economic status, remain beholden to the left-liberal ideals. The new Russian intelligentsia reveals a strong affinity with the rightwing movements in Europe and America, with the likes of Donald Trump, Viktor Urban, Giuseppe Conte, the current Polish president, and other politicians of this conservative bent. Once a sizable majority in the Soviet Union, the left-liberal *intelligenty* have dwindled into a minority during the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

Nationalism rather than internationalism marks the thinking of this new intelligentsia, whose members remain solidly anti-globalist in their outlook. Anti-immigrant sentiments and contemptuous attitudes toward the poor permeate its political rhetoric. Prominent in their mental makeup is obscurantism, which in Russia goes hand-in-hand with the ostentatious display of religiosity and the unseemly pride of being part of the dominant confession (in Russia they call it “enchurchment” or *vozekovlennost*).

An important element in the new nationalist mindset is the neglect of the old ties that used to bind the Russian Federation to its provinces in the Southern Caucuses and Central Asia. The “literature of the Soviet people” once nurtured by the metropolia ceased to draw attention it once did. School programs and publishing houses have gradually dropped their once sizable inventory of non-Russian authors from the old colonies – Chingis Aitmatov, Vasyl Bykov, Yuri Rekhteu, Fazil Iskander... In fairness, this process had started before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

An early sign of the intelligentsia ditching universalism and embracing “nationalism” was the attack carried out against Oldzhas Sulejmanov. In the mid-1970s, this Russian-speaking Kazakh poet published a book where he argued that the canonic text “Lay of Igor’s Warfare” bore the evidence of its dual linguistic origins. Critics viciously attacked this impertinent claim as nonscientific. However problematic, this concept had merit insofar as it acknowledged that the two linguistic systems overlapped in historical time and to some extent intermingled. Yes, critics rejected such approach as malicious and subversive. All the academic trappings couldn’t conceal the chauvinistic character of this polemic. Academic Likhachev, who led the charge against Sulejmanov’s thesis, recoiled from the kind of ultranationalist supporters his criticism drew out in the late Soviet period when Sulejmanov was roundly condemned as someone claiming co-ownership of the national literary treasure which, according to the critics, had no traces of the Turkic linguistic influence (Shnirelman 2012).

With the demise of the Soviet Union, its rhetoric of “the friendly bonds binding different people” and “the flourishing of the multination state” fell by the wayside. The 21st century intelligentsia is predominantly nationalistic and isolationist in its attitude towards “ethnicity,” “identity,” “national language,” and similar notions that once distinguished the fully-credentialed *intelligenty* and that were cast aside as the new intelligentsia embraced “nationalist beliefs.”

In the 1920s, Lev Trotsky called the intelligentsia in Russia “the tentacles of Europe” binding Russia to the West. Many setbacks notwithstanding, Russia came closest to becoming a European society in the late 1980s. The last three decades witnessed the wholesale retreat from this position. The intelligentsia’s discourse now sounds wholly provincial in its hyper-nationalistic tone. This is true even in the circles removed from power. The incessant talk about “us” versus “them” inundating Russia today resembles more what is going on in Hungary than what the cosmopolitan Russia stood for in the early 1990s.

Along with Soviet ideology, the intelligentsia discourse lost certain elements present in the imperial era, such as tolerance toward the minorities, confessional freedom, acceptance of

dissident opinions. An “open society” that seemed to be destined to replace the Soviet ideological dictate the late 1980s and early 1990s failed to open to Western pluralism and welfare-minded system. Instead, the new Russian Federation promotes religious intolerance and nationalistic obscurantism.

In 2018, Tamara Pletneva, a member of the Russian parliament and herself a descendent of Volga Germans who had worked as teacher in the Soviet years, published an appeal to Russian women to avoid sexual contacts with foreign visitors during the Soccer World Cup because. The reason? “Racial mixing” is dangerous for the nation’s reproductive health; the progeny resulting from such miscegenation would have to be abandoned. There you have it – the descendant of the minority persecuted in the past (her parents were exiled to Siberia), revealed herself beholden to the most archaic prejudices.

Pletneva’s grotesque foray into public policy dovetails with the image that goes back to the last century – Russia as an object of unwanted sexual advances and the intelligentsia as a go-between eager to deliver the innocent maiden to foreign suitors. From Lenin to Stalin and all the way to Putin, according to this poetic trope, the intelligentsia nudges Russia toward her shameless suitors eager to despoil its ancient virtues. The demonstratively sarcastic, sardonic and grotesque manner in which the spectacle is staged out (it is known in Russia as *steb*) only masks the nation’s slow drift from civilization to barbarism.

In 2015, a popular Russian writer Zakhar Prilepin published a tract in the broadsheet suitably titled *Russian gazette* where he listed the poets inhabiting Russia’s poetic pantheon, most of whom, Prilepin complained, sported “flawed” pedigrees. “Esenin, a man of proven Slavic ancestry but with no traces of noble blood. Pushkin’s ancestors hailed from Ethiopia and Germany. Derzhavin and Davydov both descended from the Tartars. Lermontov had Scottish precursors. Briusov and Bock were Germans. Mayakovsky, Esenin’s nemesis, was a real nobleman. Mariengoff’s mother was a Russian noblewoman. So, the only man of kindred blood seems to be Esenin.”

One can dismiss the views expressed by Pletneva and Prilepin as extreme; one can point out that the *intelligent* who still read books and wield critical theory ridicule and denounce such statements; one can argue that Zakhar Prilepin with his quest for a purely Slavic poet is a fringe phenomenon. And yet, in some ways he is a legitimate descendant of the old soviet intelligentsia. His roots go back to the 1960s, much as this “new *intelligent*” may differ on the surface from his illustrious predecessors. At any rate, that’s the conclusion Inna Kochetova (2010) reached while conducting in-depth interviews with the generation of *intelligent* who came of age in the 1960s.

On July 30, 2012, Prilepin published in the *Free press* a piece that reads like an abridged version of “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.” Titled “The letter to comrade Stalin,” this screed purported to be a penitent statement from the Jews writing on behalf of the liberal intelligentsia. In Prilepin’s reckoning, the Jews caught in the juggernaut of the Hitler-Stalin killing machine were complicit in their own destruction. Exhumed from Holocaust graves, these Jews now offer their belated thanks to Stalin who shielded them from extermination.

Five years later, this racially pure Russian *intelligent* would travel to Ukraine with the express goal to wipe off from the face of the earth the neighboring state because it stands in the way of his dream of the New Russia (Novorossiiia). Taking the nationalist mantle once worn by Edward Lemonov, the talented writer Prilepin resurrects the “Myth of the 20th century.” An open Russia, the one Trotsky saw joining Europe, failed to distance itself from the Prilepins and Lemonovs with their conservative mythology. In place of the old intelligentsia with its humanistic aspirations, we now find the walking corpses of the quasi-intelligentsia exhumed by the state-worshiping nationalists pining for the prematurely lost Stalin’s empire

This is what Prilepin has Jews-qua-liberals say in a letter addressed to his god Joseph Stalin:

You didn't let our people perish. Were it not for you, our grandparents and grand-grand-parents would have choked in gas chambers stretching from Brest to Vladivostok, and our question would have been solved once and for all. To salvage our seed, you laid into the ground Russian bodies seven-layers deep... We don't wish to sing you praises, but deep down there we know that, were it not for you, the mustached bastard, there would be none of us. It's only human to withhold gratitude, which becomes tiresome after a while (Prilepin 2012).

Russia "sacrificing itself for the Jews" is the new theodicy espoused by the high priests of the Stalin cult that flourishes in the 21st century. And this cult brings to the fore all the questions that the Russian *intelligenty* formulated over a century ago in the canonic works like *Landmarks* and *New Landmarks*. Just as in the 1920s, the Russian intelligentsia has divided itself into those who still hope to understand Russia through reason and those guided by an inflamed heart who are willing to torture and kill to impose their vision on their homeland

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