

RUSSIAN
CULTURE
AT THE
CROSSROADS

PARADOXES
OF POSTCOMMUNIST
CONSCIOUSNESS

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Introduction: Continuity and Change in Russian Culture

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This project on Russian culture goes back to the spring of 1990, when several American and Russian scholars met at the Russian Research Center at Harvard University and decided to join forces in a study of the changes sweeping the Soviet Union. From the start, the participants agreed that they would not try to chase fast breaking news from Russia—a hopeless task, given the pace of recent changes—but rather would focus on the continuity and change in Russian culture, on the long-term social forces that compel the Russian people to reexamine their values and reevaluate old ways.

We divided the labor so that each participant could explore a single cultural domain—religious, artistic, intellectual, political, economic, and so on. The borders demarcating each domain are not sharp, and the map of Russian culture we have drawn is admittedly arbitrary; but our survey is comprehensive enough to give the reader some insight into Russian culture, the key junctures in its historical development, and the momentous transformations it has been undergoing in recent years.

Our interdisciplinary project drew on the resources of both the humanities and the social sciences, which allowed for a cross-pollination of ideas. Our team of authors included historians, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, political scientists, and literary and film critics. The participants used a wide range of methods to explore their subjects, including personal interviews, analysis of Soviet literature, film, and fine arts, and opinion surveys. We proceeded on the assumptions that humanists and social scientists can learn much from each other, that sociological surveys illuminate relationships crying out for fresh interpretations, and that humanistic insights open new vistas inviting further sociological probing.

Scholars working on this project met in Las Vegas, Nevada, on November 19–20, 1992, for the Nevada Conference on Soviet Culture. Here, intellectuals raised in vastly different cultures reflected on their biases, enriched each other's perspectives, and set up a framework for future collaboration. We plan to follow up this study with three more conferences and volumes, which will explore in greater depth the artistic, political, and economic realms in Russian culture. Meanwhile, we offer the first results of our joint efforts to our colleagues, students, and the general public with an interest in Russia's past, present, and future.

The remainder of this introductory chapter focuses on several sticky methodological issues and substantive difficulties facing students of culture in general and Russian culture in particular. This is not an attempt to settle the problems vexing cultural studies but rather an effort to spell out assumptions undergirding our collective undertaking.

* * *

The vast literature on Russia has numerous references to culture. Each time this term is invoked, it acquires a somewhat different meaning, depending on whether the researcher is dealing with Russian culture, Bolshevik culture, Soviet culture, post-Soviet culture, and so on.¹ In the broadest sense, the term refers to an enduring configuration of thoughts, actions, and institutions that distinguishes people inhabiting a given sociohistorical niche. Yet, there is always some ambiguity involved in the rhetoric of culture as to how enduring the pattern in question is, how much local diversity it allows, and how far a given variation has to stray from the main theme before it becomes a cultural theme in its own right. There is also a nagging concern that the values and beliefs people express verbally do not always match the preferences and commitments they reveal in their conduct. Finally, it is not altogether clear whether high culture—literature, theology, political critique, philosophical treatises, and other highly stylized forms of public discourse—give us a reliable insight into the behaviors and lifestyles of society at large, especially when it comes to groups that do not consume high culture and are more attuned to popular culture.

In its extreme form, cultural determinism encourages one to string vastly diverse social facts on a single conceptual cord and to look for a cultural continuity impervious to historical change. Thus, Nikolai Berdiaev discerns in Russian history “spiritual ailments that could not be cured by any external social reforms and revolutions,” personality traits that “belong to the metaphysical character of the Russian people and manifest themselves in the Russian revolution.” The grotesque characters that Nikolai Gogol pic-

tured in his famous stories, Berdiaev is convinced, “are not phenomena generated by the old regime, by certain social and political causes; quite to the contrary—[these characters] have informed the regime's political and social forms, determined all that was bad in this regime.”²

Where Berdiaev sees a seamless line between pre- and postrevolutionary Russia, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn envisions a dramatic break: “[T]he transition from pre-October Russia to the USSR is no continuation but a deadly break of the spinal cord that nearly resulted in the nation's death. Soviet history does not continue the Russian evolution but perverts the latter, pushing the country in a new, unnatural direction inimical to the nation's past. . . . The terms ‘Russian’ and ‘Soviet,’ ‘Russia’ and ‘the USSR,’ are neither interchangeable nor compatible—these are polar notions which completely exclude one another.”³

These extreme views have one thing in common—a cultural determinism that hampers inquiry and forestalls efforts to understand how the interplay between tradition and structural transformation has been shaping Russian culture. Such an overdetermined view often results in attempts to decipher an immutable code enciphered into the national character and informing the nation's past, present, and future. Witness the research tradition that sought to articulate a “modal personality,” “attitude set,” “national character,” and other transhistorical cultural formations designed to explain every turn in a particular nation's history.⁴

The same logic fueled the debate about Russia's relationship to the West and the East. Recall the longstanding dispute between Slavophiles and Westernizers, which has yet failed to settle the question of whether Russian culture belongs to the European civilization or embodies Byzantine values. The same issues dominated Eurasionist theories about the link between the Russians and people populating Far Eastern and Central Asian regions. This controversy was echoed in Bolshevik writings and is evident in Anatoly Lunacharsky's contention that “we, communists, even back then when we were called social democrats, to say nothing of our predecessors like Nikolai Chernyshevsky and his spiritual brethren, always were Westernizers . . . you've got to understand that our communism is an offspring of the West.”⁵ This interminable discourse on whether Russia is the westernmost frontier of Asian civilization or the easternmost flank of Occidental culture glosses over the complexities of lived history and seems particularly dated now, when the excommunists have forged an alliance with ultranationalists in post-Soviet Russia.

Let us not forget, however, that some Russian thinkers have spurned sweeping generalizations about their country's cultural patterns. As Fyodor Dostoevsky put it, “All our Slavophilism and Westernism is but one great confusion, albeit a necessary one.”⁶ “Should we blame our national character?” queried Nikolai Dobrolyubov. “This invocation hardly re-

solves the issue, it only pushes it further back: How did our national character, passive and weak as it is, evolve? We are simply forced to move the deliberation from the present onto a historical plane."⁷ There is ample evidence, also, that Russian thinkers could rise above their partisan divisions, show respect for their opponents, and affirm their common intellectual grounds. Thus, when Timofei Granovsky, an avowed Westernizer, delivered his series of public lectures on Europe and the Middle Ages in 1844, the occasion was celebrated by both Slavophiles and Westernizers, while *Moskvitianin*, a Slavophile publication, gave this paean to Granovsky:

The main feature of Granovsky's public lectures is his extraordinary humanism, a sympathy for everything that is alive, thriving, and poetic, a sympathy that is ever ready to respond; a love that knows no boundaries, a love for whatever is nascent, and fledgling, as well for everything passing and dying, which he buries with tears in his eyes. Not a word of hatred toward a historical event escaped his lips; passing the tombs, he would peek inside but never dishonor the deceased. . . . Love and sympathy for the vanquished is the highest victory.⁸

The search for the Russianness supposedly residing in all Russians is bound to lead us astray. For every Vissarion Belinsky there will be a Nikolai Stankevich, for every Nikolai Chernyshevsky we can find an Anton Chekhov, and for every Andrei Zhdanov one could always point to an Olga Fridenberg.

In this spirit, we have resisted the temptation to collapse unwieldy historical particulars into an overarching theoretical scheme. At the same time, we did not rule out a judicious look into transhistorical patterns informing Russian culture. To discern the contours of Russia's future, we must try to disentangle the forms indigenous to Soviet culture from those going back to prerevolutionary times and the fledgling patterns coming into being right now.

We share our starting premise with those students of Soviet society who believe that a "genuine understanding of events in the Soviet Union must incorporate both density of detail and a historical perspective."⁹ Our volume opens with chapters focusing on the historical forces that shaped Soviet culture, the evolution of beliefs, values, and action patterns in key cultural spheres, and the internal contradictions peculiar to each cultural area. Then, the authors move to the transformation that various cultural spheres underwent during the perestroika years and beyond. In each of these domains we have witnessed a far-reaching reconstruction punctuated by the conflict between old values and the new, often confusing precepts brought forth by reform. We proceed on the assumption that

reforming society is impossible without reforming its members' consciousness, that macro-institutional changes must be translated into the ways people think, feel, and act if these changes are to endure. Our emphasis, therefore, is on the beliefs, attitudes, and values behind new ways of doing things, on the changes in personal and group orientations insofar as these are reflected in mass consciousness and elite cultures, which find expression in opinion polls, the popular press, literary magazines, and personal conversations.

In theoretical terms, we take our inspiration from an interpretive tradition that gives the human spirit a central place in scholarly narrative.¹⁰ Our outlook on culture owes much to Max Weber, who, in Clifford Geertz's words, taught us that "man is the animal suspended in the webs of significance he himself has spun."¹¹ This precept calls for special attention to the sense that people make of their own life situation, their professed beliefs, values, and meaningful actions. We view humans as self-conscious beings, "as characters in enacted narratives,"¹² or individuals bent on choosing their own narrative system and narrating their own lives. Starting with discourse, we move beyond it and try to discern the voice behind discourse; exploring a given narrative sequence, we want to be sensitive to individual intonation and emergent meanings, which sometimes subvert the very intent of institutionalized narrative. Bukharin might have been a faithful communist, but his unorthodox pronouncements—his individual voice—repeatedly broke through the stifling political discourse of his time. Time and place may severely constrain individual choice and personal voice, but structural constraints cannot extinguish the quest for a different, more satisfying system of values and a better lifestyle.

Although human understandings form a system, the latter is never devoid of inconsistencies and contradictions. In cultural domains, "pluralism is common, inconsistency is pervasive and syncretism is general practice."¹³ For students of Soviet culture, this insight is signally important, for it highlights conflicts endemic to the system of values supported by official Soviet culture. In the decades before perestroika, these conflicts were submerged. As time went by, they grew more visible, the gap between official values and everyday reality became more tangible, and the double life—one for official consumption and another for an inner circle of trusted friends—increasingly intolerable. We fully appreciate what Ernest Gellner calls "the social role of absurdity."¹⁴ In the years immediately preceding Gorbachev's reforms, this absurdity manifested itself in pervasive disenchantment, ironic detachment, mockery of official cultural norms, and other nonconformist gestures that exposed official hypocrisy and hinted at an autonomous agent behind the official role, an irrepressible private self ready to burst out and subvert the official grand narrative.¹⁵

We take issue with those who believe that there is “no ‘usable past’ in Russian thought,”¹⁶ who are inclined to view the Soviet era as Russian culture’s Dark Ages. A similar attitude prevailed among Enlightenment philosophers, who harshly judged the European Middle Ages a period hopelessly marred by human waste and spiritual stagnation. The Romantic successors to the Enlightenment cast a more ambivalent glance at the period; the new perception was colored in part by the growing awareness that capitalism and modernity brought in their wake deprivations and horrors all their own. To judge Soviet civilization fairly, then, one cannot only stigmatize its many failures but must also highlight its occasional graces.

We must try to understand why so many talented painters, writers, and poets placed their names on the revolutionary masthead; how Aleksandr Blok, Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Sergei Eizenshtein, and scores of other artists managed nonetheless to remain true to their talent. What is there in the totalitarian environment that nourishes friendship and creativity, which are this era’s undeniable, even if perverted, gains—gains that might disappear in a democratic, market-oriented society of the future? Yes, Soviet art helped to prop up the Bolshevik regime, but it also engendered works that through their very aesthetic qualities undermined the legitimacy of Soviet power. Why else would Soviet artists face such relentless persecution from the authorities? After all, Soviet society produced not only Andrei Zhdanov, Anton Makarenko, Trofim Lysenko, Vadim Kozhevnikov, and Georgy Markov but also Aleksei Losev, Dmitry Shostakovich, Andrei Sakharov, Yury Lyubimov, Sergei Averintsev, and many other cultural figures whose personal courage and creative accomplishments cannot be denied. Whatever lofty aspirations and momentous transcendence existed in Soviet society and culture deserve to be salvaged for posterity.

We also want to stress that the recent reforms in Russia by no means embody a uniform progress. Perestroika did not free cultural life in the Soviet Union from contradiction. “Societies do not necessarily move from one type or stage to another in an ‘upward ever, backward never fashion.’”¹⁷ Far from it, Soviet reforms set in motion fresh conflicts and bred new ironies. As one observer wrote, “Glasnost may be vital to perestroika; but it may also be its undoing.”¹⁸ The same goes for many hard-won freedoms in Russia today. Soviet artists may be free now to follow their creative instincts, but they are also relieved from the state subsidies that used to support their art. Soviet entrepreneurs can now set up their own businesses, but they must also deal with ambiguous laws, face hostile customers, and fight ruthless racketeers. Dissidents, who used to be outside critics, find themselves in a position of authority where they are expected to make good on their earlier promises. Contradictions and

ironies are the stuff of which social change is made, and we have tried to give them full treatment in this book.

Nor should our premises be taken to mean that culture exists in a vacuum, that it informs without being informed. All cultures are embedded in historical contexts and are constrained by social, economic, and political structures that inhibit or facilitate social change. The point is rather that cultural rhetoric matters, that each culture has a logic of its own, that any attempt to manipulate values and subject culture to legislative dictate are bound to misfire, as many revolutionary regimes have discovered. The line separating substance and style, rhetoric and reality, attitudes and behavior, meaning and structure is never very sharp in matters of cultural politics. Style is not some sort of wrapping that can be readily replaced, nor is substance a wine that can be poured into a new container and retain its properties intact. There is no such thing as styleless substance any more than there is substanceless style. When people forgo old rhetoric and switch to a new cultural narrative, they undermine the status quo and weaken established structures. Gorbachev learned that the hard way, when his rhetoric of glasnost went far beyond his original plan to update the cumbersome Soviet system. The same goes for Solzhenitsyn: Once he declared that “ugly methods multiply in ugly results,”¹⁹ he had little choice but to disavow Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and the ultranationalists, whose venomous rhetoric and hatred toward “alien elements” are sabotaging serious efforts at social reconstruction in Russia.

In interpreting cultural discourse, however, we do not conflate it with social life in its totality, nor do we cast verbal culture as a primary causative factor in social evolution; rather, we contend that public discourse, in both its high and popular cultural forms, feeds into reality just as it takes into itself and continuously articulates the ongoing social transformation.

In sum, we view culture as action steeped in personal narrative, drenched in emotions, grounded in common needs, and informed by institutional discourse that serves to legitimize our public conduct and justify our action to ourselves and to others.²⁰ Attitudes and conduct belong to one continuum, and values are to be understood as verbal behavior, action at a slice, while conduct is to be seen as a succession of attitudes displayed for the purpose of legitimizing oneself to others and to one’s own self. Thus, we define national character here not as a psychological structure formed at some early point in a nation’s history and determining immutable personality traits but as a semiotic or narrative structure comprised of roles, scenarios, behavioral strategies, and emotional attitudes that might be deployed on a particular occasion to legitimize the chosen course of action but that do not preclude the situational and historical transcendence of the established cultural forms. Far from being a set of

hidden values, sacred texts, socialization practices, and behavioral patterns enciphered in a code that foreordains the historical process, a nation's culture is multitextual, polyvocal, and inherently contradictory, leaving ample room for choice and creativity, personal commitment and responsibility.

Throughout this volume, we have tried to demonstrate that there is a choice to be made and a responsibility to be claimed by those who have to grapple with Russian culture at this critical historical juncture. Russian culture is at a crossroads; its future depends in large measure on the choices that its agents make at present and in years to come. To be sure, the cataclysmic break with the past we have witnessed in Russia in the last decade cannot be directed and controlled from above. This break produces unanticipated consequences, stirs conflicts, and breeds deviant conduct—a pattern well known to students of social change. Underlying this pattern is what Emile Durkheim called anomie,²¹ when old norms no longer apply but new ones are too vague and problematic to command universal assent. As numerous accounts attest,²² behavioral changes in revolutionary times are accompanied by a cognitive restructuring that sets new standards of valuation and breeds a sense of moral malaise. What people in Russia are discovering is that the system is encrypted in their selves, that it cannot be turned on and off at will. Bred into people's bones for seventy-odd years, Soviet culture is bound to persist for some time after the coercive structures supporting it have crumbled. It would be naive to believe that our efforts to illuminate Russian culture could have any discernable impact on its course. But to the extent that our study facilitates Russian people's efforts to come to grips with their past traumatic experiences, it might make cultural change in Russia less painful for those who have to live through it.

Although our project attends to an unfinished revolution and deals with history in the making, it has something to offer to the timeless mission of the humanities and social sciences. Perestroika is a story of the human spirit in distress. It tells us about peoples trapped in history, sucked into a system they despise, yet unsure of the way out. If progress to date has been disappointing, that is not necessarily because the reformers have charted a wrong course. It took one day for the Israelites to exit Egypt and forty years to reach the promised land. An entirely new generation had to come into its own, one unschooled in the old ways and raised in a new culture, before the Israelites managed to leave their gloomy past behind. Russian reforms represent the quest for a new culture that several generations take part in but will bear fruit for generations to come. This may be a local history, but its lessons are universal. Its significance reaches far beyond Russia, and it can teach us about our own values and cultures, and the human predicament in general.

Notes

1. E.g. Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed., *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978); Maurice Friedberg, *Russian Culture in the 1980's* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1985); Abbott Gleason, Peter Kenez, and Richard Stites, eds., *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in Russian Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Nils Ake Nilsson, ed., *Art, Society, Revolution: Russia, 1917–1921* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1979).
2. Nikolai Berdiaev, "Dukhi Russkoi revoliutsii," in *Puti Evrazii: Russkaia intelligentsiia i sudby Rossii* (Moscow: Russkaia Kniga, [1922] 1992), p. 7. Unless otherwise indicated, here and elsewhere in the Introduction, the translation from the Russian is by Dmitri Shalin.
3. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Publitsistika: Stati i rechi* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1981), p. 273.
4. See Margaret Mead, *Soviet Attitudes to Authority* (New York: William Morrow, 1951); and Geoffrey Gorer and John Rickman, *The People of Great Russia* (London: Norton Library, 1949).
5. Anatoly Lunacharsky, "Nashe zapadnichestvo," *Ogonek*, no. 5 (1929): 4.
6. Fyodor M. Dostoevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh*, vol. 26 (Moscow: Nauka, [1880] 1984), p. 147.
7. Nikolai A. Dobrolyubov, *Izbrannoe* (Moscow: Sovremennik, 1984), p. 458.
8. Quoted in A. Stankevich, *T. N. Granovsky i ego perepiska*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Tovariščestvo Tipografii A. N. Mamontova), pp. 127–28.
9. Ben Eklof, *Soviet Briefing: Gorbachev and the Reform Period* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), p. 7. See also Timothy Colton, *The Dilemma of Reform in the Soviet Union* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1986); Robert O. Crummey, ed., *Reform in Russia and the U.S.S.R: Past and Prospects* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Frederick S. Starr, "Soviet Union: A Civil Society," *Foreign Policy* 70 (1988): 26–41; Robert Tucker, *Political Culture and Leadership in Soviet Russia* (New York: Norton, 1987).
10. See Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York: Free Press, 1949); Dmitri N. Shalin, "Behavioral and Post-behavioral Methodologies in Communist Studies," *Soviet Union* 8 (1981): 186–222.
11. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 5.
12. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 202.
13. Margaret S. Archer, *Culture and Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 9. See also Myron J. Aronoff, *Culture and Political Change* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1983); Ernest Gellner, *Legitimation of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974); Feliks Gross, *Ideologies, Goals, and Values* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985); Lynn R. Kahle, ed., *Social Values and Social Change* (New York: Praeger, 1983).
14. Gellner, *Legitimation of Belief*, p. 36.
15. Various dissimulation schemes employed by Soviet scholars are discussed in Dmitri N. Shalin, "The Development of Soviet Sociology, 1956–1976," *Annual*

Review of Sociology 4 (1978): 171–91; “Marxist Paradigm and Academic Freedom,” *Social Research* 47 (1980): 361–82; and “Sociology for the Glasnost Era: Institutional and Substantive Changes in Recent Soviet Sociology,” *Social Forces* 68 (1990): 1–21.

16. Marshall S. Shatz, *The Soviet Dissident in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 38.

17. Myron J. Aronoff, *Culture and Political Change* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1983), p. 7.

18. Eklof, *Soviet Briefing*, p. 183.

19. Solzhenitsyn, *Publitsistika*, p. 169.

20. For further discussion of some of the theoretical issues raised in this introduction, see Shalin, “Behavioral and Post-behavioral Methodologies in Communist Studies”; “Pragmatism and Social Interactionism,” *American Sociological Review*, no. 1 (1986): 9–30; “Romanticism and the Rise of Sociological Hermeneutics,” *Social Research* 53 (1986): 77–123; “Introduction: Habermas, Pragmatism, Interactionism,” in Dmitri N. Shalin, ed., *Habermas, Pragmatism, and Critical Theory, Symbolic Interaction* (special issue), no. 4 (1992): 251–59; “Critical Theory and the Pragmatist Challenge,” *American Journal of Sociology* 96 (1992): 237–79; and “Modernity, Postmodernism, and Pragmatist Inquiry,” in Dmitri N. Shalin, ed., *Self in Crisis: Identity and the Postmodern Condition, Symbolic Interaction* (special issue), no. 4 (1993): 303–32.

21. Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (New York: Free Press, 1951).

22. Roy Medvedev and Giulietto Chiesa, *Time of Change* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989); Milton Rokeach, *The Nature of Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 1973); George Stocking, *Romantic Motives* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Nancy Eisenberg, Janusz Reykowski, and Ervin Staub, *Social and Moral Values* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1989); Melford Spiro, *Culture and Human Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Michael Thompson, Richard Ellis, and Aaron Wildavsky, *Cultural Theory* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).