

# Yielding center stage

By Dmitri N. Shalin

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An unheralded meeting took place in Moscow last summer between an ex-Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, and several Russian intellectuals, all veterans of glasnost and perestroika. The mood was grim, harsh words flew back and forth, but the nostalgia pervading the assembly underscored the high stakes that Gorbachev and his intellectual allies had in perestroika and the dramatic reversal of fortunes they suffered since its demise.

Hardly ever did intellectuals enjoy a greater influence in Russia than during Gorbachev's reign. Perestroika assured them the right to free speech, unprecedented artistic freedom, wide access to the mass media, the chance to be elected to the Soviet legislature and to serve in government. At one time, half of Gorbachev's cabinet members and aids boasted top scientific degrees or strong artistic and journalistic credentials. Many more wielded power through state-appointed committees, research think-tanks and artistic boards previously dominated by party bureaucrats.

Perestroika delivered to intellectuals the freedoms capitalism spawned while preserving the economic security they had come to expect from socialism. What other society would lavish funds on its artists, no strings attached? Never mind that the product was often a financial flop — the state was always there to foot the bill.

Russian movie makers shot three times as many films in 1991 as in 1988, while theater attendance was halved during this period. Out of 100 films purchased by Moscow between January and July of 1991, 42 were never released to the public. Countless writers, composers, painters and others from the so-called "creative intelligentsia" could count on orders from the state, simply by virtue



"FRANKLY, COMRADE, I THINK THESE CHANGES ARE COMING TOO QUICKLY..."

of their membership in professional unions.

The "scientific intelligentsia" had its field day, too. Although funding for research had not increased and in some cases dwindled, scientists were freer than ever to define their priorities. Scholars who had long ceased to be productive and switched to other pursuits continued to draw salaries from the National Academy of Sciences.

Soviet intellectuals turned out in droves to defend the Russian Parliament against the August 1991 coup and cheered the loudest when the old guard was dealt its ignominious defeat, but their victory proved pyrrhic. The communist era is history now, and so is the great Russian intelligentsia.

For all their hatred of the state, Russian intellectuals owed it their high status and economic security. Intellectuals who loathed the officialdom managed to carve out a comfortable niche in it. Others found safe havens in scholarly centers which tolerated considerable intellectual, if not ideological, diversity. With the omnipotent state lying in ruins, the Russian intelligentsia has lost the bulwark against the market forces it's helped to unleash and is beginning to feel their devastating impact.

My recent visit to Russia confirms that intellectuals are among the hardest hit groups in the Russian population. Gone

are the heady perestroika days when the state subsidized artistic creativity. Many artists are no longer able to eke out a living by their craft. The world-renown Bolshoi Ballet is facing bankruptcy. High-brow newspapers and literary magazines which once boasted circulation in the millions, cannot sell enough copies to stay in business. I met artists who had been raising potatoes, selling their belongings, and sub-letting their flats to supplement their meager incomes. No longer fettered by censorship, Russian artists have discovered that they are not free from the market forces which now determine whether their work has artistic merits.

The change has been rough on scientists, too. The country's research centers are laying off their staff, forcing top scholars to seek employment outside Russia and others to look for alternative careers. University professors have seen their pay dwindle from 10 times the national average under Stalin to the present day paltry 30,000 rubles (\$30) a month — a salary of a freshly minted tram operator.

Looking back at the Russian intelligentsia, one could see that its strengths and weaknesses were nurtured by the authoritarian political system, by the very oppression intellectuals fought since the early 19th century. It was in opposition to the

arrogant state that Russian intellectuals developed their radical commitment to justice, concern for the disadvantaged and intense spirituality. Somewhere along the line, they convinced themselves that they were the salt of the Earth, that the state owed them a comfortable living, that they knew the best what the public good was and which sacrifices could be exacted to bring it about.

Swept into power on the wave of glasnost, intellectuals proved ill-prepared for the responsibilities that come with it. They have learned the hard way that political dissent cannot pass for a coherent policy, that moral absolutism is incompatible with prudent compromise required by democracy, that power corrupts even most dedicated civil servants. Boris Yeltsin's democrats show all the overconfidence that marked the Russian intellectuals in the past while continuing to gloss over their massive failures.

Now their time is up. The great Russian intelligentsia is finally yielding the center stage, its battled-weary warriors turning into professional politicians, shrewd bureaucrats, market-savvy artists, cost-conscious scientists and other interest groups with agenda of their own. Alas, its historical mission has been accomplished.

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