RUSSIAN CULTURE AT THE CROSSROADS

PARADOXES OF POSTCOMMUNIST CONSCIOUSNESS

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edited by
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No group cheered louder for Soviet reform, had a bigger stake in perestroika, or suffered more in its aftermath than the Russian intelligentsia. Today, nearly a decade after Mikhail Gorbachev unveiled his plan to reform Soviet society, the mood among Russian intellectuals is decidedly gloomy. “The intelligentsia has carried perestroika on its shoulders,” laments Yury Shchekochikhin, a noted commentator. “So why does it feel so forlorn, superfluous, and forgotten?”1 Another commentator warns that the intellectual stratum “has become so thin that in three or four years the current genocide against the intelligentsia will surely wipe it out.”2 Andrei Bitov, one of the country’s finest writers, waxes nostalgic about the Brezhnev era and “the golden years of stagnation when . . . people could do something real, like build homes, publish books, and what not.”3

The frustration and self-doubt afflicting Russian intellectuals today might seem excessive, but they are hardly unprecedented. In the last 150 years or so, every crucial turn in Russian history has touched off a new round of debate about the intelligentsia and its role as the conscience of society and guardian of national culture. This discourse by and about the intelligentsia has shaped the distinct themes, literary props, psychological traits, and favored political agendas of Russian intellectual culture. Russian intellectual culture shares with its Western counterpart a belief in directed social change and cultural critique as a tool for social reconstruction. East or West, intellectuals produce a “distinctive culture of discourse,”4 through which they stake their claim to status and income in modern society. The greater the significance society assigns to the written word, intellectual creativity, and social criticism, the greater the prestige and privilege of the intelligentsia. By keeping critical discourse aflame and promoting high culture, the intelligentsia also increases its cultural capital. What sets Russian intellectual culture apart is the crying gap between its modern aspirations and the nation’s conservative heritage. Its other
distinctive feature is the bold, even extravagant, manner in which Russian intellectuals have asserted their vanguard role and claimed moral leadership in society. As Aleksandr Yanov, a prominent Russian intellectual, put it, “One advantage that Russia has over the West is its colossal intellectual wealth.” The implication is that if only the Russian intelligentsia could deploy its intellectual resources fully, reforms would have a chance. This sentiment is shared by many Russian intellectuals who continue to search for ways to mobilize culture as a strategic national resource and, in the process, improve their own sinking fortunes.

Whatever their vested interests, intellectuals’ yen for stewardship in a rapidly changing Russian society should not be treated lightly. The ongoing discourse about the intelligentsia and its role in current reforms has left a mark on public consciousness and found its way into wider social practice. The question is whether the nation is willing to follow its intelligentsia and, if so, where.

To understand intellectual discourse in today’s Russia, we need to examine Russian intellectual culture in its formative years. After tracing the origins of the Russian intellectual tradition, I outline its evolution in the Soviet era. Next, I address the challenges the intelligentsia faces in post-Soviet Russia, the stunning reversal of fortunes Russian intellectuals have suffered in recent years, and their struggle to reassert their critical role in society. Finally, I offer some speculations about the Russian intelligentsia’s future.

The Origins of Russian Intellectual Culture

Although the Russian intelligentsia did not evolve into a self-conscious social force until the mid-nineteenth century, its origins can be traced to the early eighteenth century, when Peter the Great embarked on a crash campaign to modernize Russia. Backward, insular, and largely illiterate, Russia was to be brought abreast with the leading European nations through radical reforms in its political, religious, military, and civil service structures. To that effect, Peter I invited experts from all over Europe to Russia, sent young men abroad for study, set up a civil service bureaucracy, reorganized the army and the navy on Western models, established the Russian Academy of Sciences, and encouraged court poets to immortalize the tsar’s glorious deeds. This forced Westernization exposed the country to ideas that had no roots in Russia proper and so were met with resistance from its people, who saw the reforms as an affront to Russian Orthodoxy and considered Peter the Great the anti-Christ. But the new class of “servicemen” and courtiers who owed their fortunes to Peter the Great and his successors learned to appreciate the new ways and prided themselves on being the purveyors of European mores in their rough-hewn homeland.

It would be wrong to assume that the proto-intellectual stratum created during Peter the Great’s reign instantly produced Western-style intellectuals who embraced the ideals of religious tolerance, political liberty, and a constitutional state. The ruthless manner in which Peter I imposed his reforms on his countrymen was inimical to the Occidental humanistic heritage, with its signature belief in the dignity of every human being. Nor was there any evidence that Russian “servicemen,” clerics, academics, and poets had any agenda of their own. Whatever their internal squabbles and personal gripes against the powerful, eighteenth-century bureaucrats and large identified with the state and its authoritarian domestic policies and imperial aspirations.

As the century wore on, signs began to emerge that the Westernized intellectual stratum was coming into its own and growing uneasy about Russia’s backwardness. Catherine II’s interest in the French Enlightenment encouraged Russian writers to voice their judgments about the country’s social and political affairs. But when some dared to shed their roles as official bards and court wits and venture an opinion mildly critical of Her Majesty’s realm, the empress sternly reprimanded them. The dissatisfaction with serfdom that Vasily Kapnist cautiously conveyed in one of his poems was met with a rebuke from Catherine II, who told the writer to mind his own business and barred him from court. Nikolai Novikov, a prominent publisher and educator in Catherine II’s reign, was sent to prison after he satirized Russia’s gentry. When Western-educated Aleksandr Radishchev wrote a book lamenting the Russian peasants’ sorry state, he was stripped of his nobleman’s status and sentenced to death (the sentence was changed to life exile with confiscation of property).

During the reign of Alexander I, the gap between autocracy and the Westernized stratum widened. In 1812, Napoleon suffered a crushing defeat. Russian troops marched triumphantly into Paris. As it happened, the occupiers fell under the spell of republicanism. Thirty years later, the young military commanders attempted to overthrow the tsar and replace autocracy with a constitutional monarchy, dramatically underscoring the extent to which Western ideals had permeated Russia’s educated class. The Decembrists’ uprising, as this event was called, failed miserably, but in the eyes of many contemporaries and future commentators, it marked a watershed in Russian history. The failed 1825 coup pinpointed the growing alienation between Western-minded intellectuals and a nation still deeply ensconced in its premodern ways, and it presaged the emergence of a politically conscious, socially uprooted, and increasingly radical Russian intelligentsia.
The French Enlightenment, German philosophy, and early socialist teachings were among the most important Western influences on Russian intellectual culture in its formative years. To the Enlightenment, Russian intellectuals owed their preoccupation with constitutional polity and the republican system of government. German philosophy left its mark through a theory that hailed the world historical spirit passing through several progressive stages and elevating humanity to an imminently rational state. The socialist ideas that began to reach Russia in the 1840s furnished fresh rationales for a critique of Russia’s backward economy and pervasive inequality.

The term “intelligentsia” has a Latin root and Russian grammatical form, suggesting a hybrid origin. Georgy Fedotov gives a precise date of birth for the intelligentsia: 1837, the year Aleksandr Pushkin died. Pyotr Boborykin claimed to have coined the term in 1866. Its most likely source is the Hegelian philosophy of spirit, which envisioned a superhuman intelligence operating in the universe and inexorably moving society toward an ever more perfect state via the rationalizing activity of self-reflexive minds. From this abstract philosophical doctrine, Russian intellectuals inferred that their country had to be modernized in line with world historical (read “Western European”) development and that the elite of Western-educated, publicly minded individuals was best suited for the job. The Westernizers did not seem to be overly concerned that their schemes had hardly any moorings in the Russian political tradition. They had little doubt that their intelligence, theoretical savvy, and boundless energy would surmount the historical obstacles in their path. Hence Georgy Fedotov’s famous definition: “The Russian intelligentsia is a group, movement, and tradition marked by the principled nature of its objectives and the unsoundness of its principles.” The arrogant stance Westernized intellectuals assumed toward their own cultural heritage had a direct impact on their psychology and behavior. Having sided with progress, Russian intellectuals could not help but feel superior to their society. With the native tradition cast as a fetter on their enlightened spirit, they were apt to scorn as retrograde anyone who saw something valuable in Russia’s past. Self-appointed agents of history, they treated all mundane authorities and institutions with contempt and vowed to destroy them. Alas, being ahead of one’s time proved exceedingly costly, as critically thinking intellectuals discovered in their struggle with Russia’s formidable secret police, called upon to crush these “enemies of the state.”

Critical intellectual ferment is already evident in Pyotr Chaadaev, a celebrated nineteenth-century intellectual whose robust critique of Russia’s insular ways and longing for European culture so angered Nicholas I that he pronounced Chaadaev a “madman”—the first, though hardly the last, case of its kind in the Russian intelligentsia’s beleaguered history. Taking his cue from Friedrich Schelling, Chaadaev extolled “universal intelligence,” “universal reason,” “one single intellectual force in the whole universe,” and “the unique vision of the future granted to some chosen men” whose selfless labors were enlisted to impart world historical wisdom to reality. Chaadaev’s views were unabashedly elitist: “I have always thought that humanity could advance only by following its elite, by following those who have the mission of leading it... that the instincts of majorities are necessarily more egotistical, more emotional, more narrow... that human intelligence always manifests itself most powerfully only in the solitary mind, center and sun of its sphere.”

Once the task of universal intelligence was fully comprehended, everything had to submit to its impersonal dictate. The individual was but a vehicle for divine providence, any private existence largely irrelevant in the face of the universal spirit’s transhistorical agenda: “[T]he human being should be understood once and for all as an intelligent being in abstraction, but never as the individual and personal being, circumscribed by the present moment, an ephemeral insect, which is born and dies on the same day, and which is linked with the totality of things merely by the law of birth and corruption.” From then on, objective value was to be judged by a person’s readiness to subordinate his private urges to universal reason and to fulfill its ultimate goal.

Having set this lofty ideal for himself and his contemporaries, Chaadaev quickly discovered how hard it was to live up to it. In 1836, after his philosophical letters incurred the tsar’s wrath, Chaadaev found himself hounded by the police and shunned by the public. Hastily, he renounced his views and retreated into proud solitude. Later, when Alexander Herzen, another prominent Russian intellectual, praised Chaadaev as a precursor of free thought in Russia, Chaadaev dispatched a letter to the political police headquarters, where he denounced his compatriot and swore his loyalty to the tsar in the most abject terms. Asked why he had to abase himself so, he replied that one simply “must save one’s skin.”

This surrender took its emotional toll on Chaadaev, who had foreseen the crushing burden the intellectual would bear in this Godforsaken land: “Where is the man who would be strong enough not to end up hating himself, living in eternal contradiction, always thinking one thing and doing another... What causes this terrible ulcer which is destroying us?” This “terrible ulcer” would eat away at several generations of Russian intellectuals daring to oppose the powerful state. Few would suffer more from it than Chaadaev’s friend, Russia’s beloved poet, Aleksandr Pushkin.

Educated in the state-run lyceum for young noblemen, in his formative years Pushkin imbibed the free thinking that would lead his friends to Senate Square in St. Petersburg, where the Decembrists staged their
abortive coup. Pushkin did not mince words in his early lyrics, which breathed regicidal fervor:

Thou, scoundrel autocratic!
I hate thy throne and I hate thee.
My heart feels cruelly ecstatic
When thy and thy kind's doom I see.16

His contemporaries remembered Pushkin in his young adulthood as an irreverent, Jacobin spirit who did not mince words vilifying the government: "A: the governor’s [mansion], on the streets, on the square, he was always eager to explain to anybody that he who did not want to change the government was a scoundrel. His conversation was replete with cursing and sarcasm, and even his courtesy was punctuated with an ironic smile."17 Despite his radicalism, the poet’s political preferences were rather modest: he was ready to settle for a constitutional monarchy.

Rulers! your laurels and your crowns accrue
To your estate from law and not from nature;
You hover high and mighty over nations,
Alas, eternal law reigns over you.18

Even in the liberal reign of Alexander I (the tsar himself at one point toyed with the idea of constitutional monarchy), such rhetoric was deemed highly inflammatory. The tsar had little use for a poet who dared to put him on notice that

I cannot force my bashful muse
Tsars and courtiers to amuse.19

Pushkin’s verses, widely circulated and popular among future Decembrists, landed him in exile, which the poet would not escape until after the Decembrists’ failed uprising.

After Alexander I died in 1825, his brother, Nicholas I, ascended to the throne. Before he brought Pushkin back from exile, he ordered him, along with a few other free thinkers, to write a report on the linkage between education and pernicious republicanism, effectively inviting the poet to repent for his youthful indiscretions. Pushkin’s reply was emblematic of the torturous exercises that Russian intellectuals would have to perform to save their skins without completely dishonoring themselves. He charged his friends with “criminal delusions” and “low morals,” blamed “foreign ideologism” and “deficient education” for their “wanton behavior,” called for “drastic measures” to stem free thinking among Russian youth, and demanded “the end to home schooling,” which let minors escape the state’s “omniscient oversight.”20 At the same time, he intimated that harsh censorship might have driven honorable men to clandestine publications, that it was better to expose young people to republican ideas in school than make them yield to hostile agitation later on, and that a person’s rank in society ought to be made commensurate with his education—quite unorthodox ideas, given the period’s reactionary tenor.

About the same time, as if to calm his guilty conscience, Pushkin wrote one of his best-known verses, which he dedicated to his comrades exiled to Siberia:

Deep down in Siberia’s mines
Sustain your proud, silent patience,
Your anguished toil will slowly grind,
Your noble dreams not perish traceless.

Confidently, Pushkin predicted that the time would come when

Your heavy fetters will fall off,
The walls of prisons crumble—and freedom
Will greet you at the gates,
As friends restore your swords to you.21

These words are familiar to all Soviet schoolchildren. Much less known is Pushkin’s other side, his secret dealings with the authorities, his endless entreaties to the chief of Russia’s secret police: “If the emperor wishes to use my pen, I would be eager, to the best of my abilities and with requisite precision, to fulfill His Highness’s will. . . . I offer my magazine to the government—as its tool for shaping public opinion.”22 This is from the man who confessed that he was “tired of depending on the good or bad digestion of one superior or another. . . . All I crave is independence.”23 And again: “What a devil’s jest to force me, with my mind and talent, to be born in Russia!”24 "Of course, I loathe my homeland from head to toe, though I feel annoyed when a foreigner shares this feeling. But you, who are not on the leash," Pushkin queried his friend, “how can you live in Russia? If the tsar granted me freedom, I would not stay here a month.”25 Trying to reconcile these conflicting sentiments, Pushkin became ill-tempered and depressed. Freedom from political demands was
all an artist should long for, according to the mature Pushkin. This much-quoted verse written in his last year sums up his disillusionment:

I do not cherish your much touted rights,  
Which set some heads to reeling.  
I do not blame the gods who have denied me  
The sweet pleasure of disputing taxes and meddling  
With tsars forever waging wars among themselves.  
Why should I care whether our press be free  
To fool its readers, if watchful censorship  
Thwarts noisy demagogues’ ambitious designs.  
All these, you see, are words, words, words.  
Far better, nobler rights are dear to me;  
Far more auspicious freedoms do I crave:  
To bow to the tsar, to bow to the people—  
What difference does it make? God be their judge.  
To no one else

Accounting for my deeds, pleasing no other but myself,  
Refusing for gain to bend my neck, my conscience,  
my belief;  
Wandering here and there as I alone see fit,  
Standing in awe, admiring nature’s sacred beauty,  
Beholding artistry’s inspired flight, transfixed  
In joy and wonderment by its eternal truth—  
Now, that is happiness! Those are rights . . .

Toward the end of his life, Pushkin grew increasingly irritated with his old friends and unhappy about the real and imaginary slights he suffered from Nicholas I and his servants, who never believed in his conversion. Several times he offered to resign from his lowly position in the court hierarchy but was dissuaded. A notorious womanizer, he found the tables turned on himself when Georges Dantès, a dazzling Frenchman serving to forgive his indiscretion, asking his friend Vasily Zhukovsky to “tell him that it is a pity I have to die; I would have been his completely.” The autocrat struck a noble pose, forgiving Pushkin his sins against the throne, paying off his numerous debts, and promising to look after his wife and children. The foremost poet and intellectual of his time, Aleksandr Pushkin died a broken man.

The First Intelligenty

Neither Chaadaev nor Pushkin saw themselves as intelligency—members of the Russian intelligentsia. Both were firmly rooted in the estate system and harbored the same class prejudices against the lower orders that were common at the time. Most contemporary Westernizers resigned themselves to studying the latest foreign theories among like-minded nobles. Nikolai Stankevich, Timofei Granovsky, Ivan Turgenev, Nikolai Ogarev, Alexander Herzen—the golden youth of the 1840s—gathered in small circles where free thinking continued to flourish under the stifling rule of Nicholas I. “What is, is right,” pronounced the reigning Hegelian wisdom, from which the Russian intellectuals concluded that they must be patient, that the universal spirit cannot be rushed, that no order was ready to fall until it had exhausted its historical potential.

The revolutionary tide that swept Europe in the late 1840s washed up onto Russian shores socialist slogans that caused Russia’s stagnant culture to explode. The case of Alexander Herzen, the brilliant socialist writer and one of Russia’s first political exiles to the West, is most revealing here. Son of a Russian nobleman and a German woman, Herzen was schooled at his father’s estate in a typically eclectic fashion, learning Latin, German, and French, reading Voltaire and Diderot, soaking up the republican spirit. He enrolled at Moscow State University, where he joined an underground movement of youth looking for ways to snub Russia’s hated institutions. The young men’s aversion to autocracy was awakened by the Decembrists’ uprising and fortified by a heavy dose of Fourierism and Saint Simonism. In 1834, the student group was exposed and its leaders exiled to the east, where Herzen spent eight years working in various provincial administrations and learning more than he cared to about Russia’s retrograde customs. After a return to Moscow engineered by his powerful friends, Herzen was exiled one more time, came back again, and in 1847, under the pretext of his wife’s poor health, managed to leave Russia, never to return to his homeland.

Residing alternatively in Switzerland, France, Italy, and London, he took active part in the revolutionary upheavals that swept across Europe from 1848 on, and in the process underwent what he called a “perestroika of all convictions.” He rejected German idealism as too abstract and consecrated himself to socialism and materialism, convinced that science and education could alleviate absolutism, foster equality, and deliver humanity from its misery. While Herzen’s passion for liberalism sometimes approached religious fervor, his caustic, brilliant mind continued to check his theoretical constructs against reality, openly acknowledging wherever the former exceeded his expectations:
Liberalism is the last religion, although its church is not otherworldly and its theodicy is political; it stands firmly on the ground and allows for no mystical reconciliations; it has to reconcile itself with reality in deed. . . Liberalism has exposed the chasm in all its nakedness: the sickly consciousness of this chasm breeds the irony and skepticism that mark modern man and help him sweep away the remnants of past idols. Irony conveys the disappointment that logical truth is not the same as historical truth, that aside from dialectical development, truth has its passionate and contingent development, that in addition to reason, truth also has its romance.  

In the mid-1850s, Herzen started a successful publishing venture, which included his famous magazine The Bell, dedicated to three major themes: the institutionalization of glasnost, the abolition of serfdom, and the end to corporal punishment. Later he also published Voices from Russia, where intellectuals could clandestinely print their philippics against the tsarist state. Issues were smuggled back to Russia, where they were widely read by the regime’s proponents and opponents alike, with the top courtiers boasting their familiarity with the latest articles. Herzen was among the very first in Russia to zero in on glasnost as the pivot on which progressive reforms must turn. "Because of censorship, we are unfamiliar with glasnost, which amazes, frightens, and offends us. It is time for the comedians from the imperial secret police to realize that sooner or later their actionists, kept secret behind bars and buried in cemeteries, will become known and their shameful deeds revealed in their utter ugliness to the entire world."  

Herzen’s own belief in the power of glasnost and enlightenment remained unshaken throughout his life, but his hope to see liberal ideas triumph in his lifetime gradually faded away. He was also profoundly affected with the West and its bourgeois culture—meshchansky, as the Russians would call it contemptuously. All of Europe, in his estimation, split into two competing and equally philistine camps: “[O]n the one hand, there are philistine-proprietors anxious to hold on to their monopoles; on the other, propertyless philistines [meshchane], who strain to but cannot dispossess their counterparts. That is to say, greed on the one side, envy on the other.”  

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There seemed to be little prospect of a rational, humane community anywhere in the world. As his hopes waned, Herzen grew ironic, wistful, and sarcastic, as did so many of his Russian contemporaries who had placed their faith in reason only to discover that reality refused to submit to its dictates. Herzen’s irritability and unhappiness were exacerbated by personal misfortunes and family problems, as well as generational shifts in values. The new crop of Russian intellectuals found him too liberal and conciliatory. Indeed, toward the end of his life, just as the mood in Russia was becoming belligerent, Herzen renounced revolutionary violence as inimical to constructive social change. Herzen’s final judgments read as a warning to the coming generation of freedom fighters who failed to understand that “civilization by the whip, liberation by the guillotine,” would spell a new tyranny: “Every cause that requires crazy, mystic, and fantastic means will in the end breed crazy consequences along with the reasonable ones. Clearly, this is not our path; understanding and discussion are our only weapon.”  

Herzen’s social origins and considerable family fortune might have had something to do with his political moderation. But for his successors who could boast neither his pedigree nor his financial resources, moderation in the fight for freedom and equality was no virtue. The new breed of intellectuals known as raznochintsy (literally, people from different ranks) came from diverse social and economic strata. One thing these sons and daughters of clergy, servicemen, teachers, or small gentry had in common was that they had severed most of their ties with their social stratum and often maintained a threadbare existence. It was this new crop of déclassé intellectuals who came into their own in the 1850s and blossomed in the 1860s that was for the first time identified as the “Russian intelligentsia.” While paying homage to their predecessors and borrowing from them some insights, the new intellectuals spurned noblemen-critics as dreamers, lost souls, or “superfluous people” incapable of linking thoughts with deeds. They considered Pushkin “not serious enough,” “too much of an epicurean,” “too harmonious by nature to take on life’s anomalies.”  

Ivan Turgenev, another nobleman writer with liberal sensibilities and a militancy in his view of life, would dominate high cultural discourse in Russia until the early twentieth century. Here are some key themes and accents that marked their discourse and gave Russian intellectual culture its unique historical flavor:  

1. A critical approach that judges every social event or institution from the standpoint of the progressive historical agenda.
2. A moral maximalism or expectation that the intelligentsia will subordinate their personal needs to public interests, treat everyone according to their contribution to the liberation process, and do everything possible to hasten the arrival of a just society.

3. A vanguardism that calls upon a few educated, conscientious, critically minded individuals to lead the toiling masses toward the final battle against the oppressive and obsolete regime.

4. An ideologically inspired compassion for the toiling classes and oppressed groups who suffer under the autocratic regime without being able to voice their grievances or understand what causes their pains.

5. A programmatic commitment to political, social, and economic equality as the historically most efficient and humane form of social existence.

6. A readiness to resort to class violence as a necessary evil given a reactionary state that suppresses glasnost and stifles legitimate venues for social reconstruction.

7. A split between word and deed that ascribes to the free word persecuted by the defensive authorities the status of the ultimate deed.

8. An ironic detachment in interpersonal relations and a sarcastic attitude toward all authorities, highlighting the gap between the official roles Russian intellectuals have to play in public and the ideal selves they aspire to be.

9. An opposition to bourgeois culture, or meshchanstvo, in all its manifestations in contemporary family life, relations between friends, artistic tastes, and so on.

10. An exalted vision of art and literature as a powerful medium for shaping public opinion and communicating to the masses socialist ideals and ideologically sound attitudes toward society.

This list is not exhaustive; a particular stylistic feature could be present or absent in any given individual. Somewhere at the intersection of these discursive traits, however, emerged the nineteenth-century intelligentsia's creed. The change in the Russian intellectual style could be gleaned from Dobrolyubov's celebrated dictum:

"..."
fortable chairs after a heavy meal,” wrote Belinsky. “No, from the standpoint of the public, literature is res publica, a public cause, a great deed, the source of moral joy and exaltation. . . . Where there is a public, the writing has a national agenda. . . . Where there is a public, there is public opinion.” The mid-nineteenth-century intelligentsia’s contribution to the cause of freedom was mostly through literary criticism, which was just about the only semi-legitimate (eased up somewhat in 1865, censorship remained strict throughout the nineteenth century) form of critical discourse possible at the time. It was through the painstaking, sometimes forced, occasionally brilliant critique of literary works, theatrical performances, concerts, painting exhibitions, and the like that the Russian public learned how to glean the Zeitgeist from an artist’s work. Through the eyes of Belinsky, Dobrolyubov, Chernyshevsky, and Pisarev, many loyal Russians came to see the corrupt state officials brought to life by Gogol’s satirical imagination, to empathize with the yearnings of superfluous people like Mikhail Lermontov’s Pechorin and Ivan Goncharov’s Oblomov, and to discern the new hard-edged intellectuals exemplified by Ivan Turgenev’s Bazarov and Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s Rakhmetov.

The last type is particularly interesting, for it embodied the qualities that Russian intellectuals valued in themselves. “Rakhmetov can do without what is called personal happiness,” wrote Pisarev about a revolutionary hero pictured in Chernyshevsky’s novel What Is to Be Done. “He has no need to refresh his strength through a woman’s love, pleasant music, a Shakespearian play, or a festive supper with good friends. He has one weakness: a good cigar, which he needs to clear his thoughts. But even this pleasure is but a means for him: he smokes not because he enjoys smoking but because smoking stimulates his mental activity.” What is remarkable about statements like this that proliferated in this era is their cultivated asceticism and emotional self-repression. There seemed to be no room for private feelings in the Russian intelligentsia’s moral calculus; a person was not to be judged on any other basis than his ideological convictions. We already saw a hint of this antipersonalism in Chaadaev (though not in Pushkin, the quintessential humanist!), who argued that the individual was but an “abstraction” and “ephemeral insect” devoid of significance apart from his preassigned place in the world historical drama. One senses an even greater stringency in the self-imposed rigors of the intelligentsia. “The death of the particular for the sake of the universal—such is the universal law,” intoned Belinsky. “From now on, man is nothing for me; man’s beliefs are everything. Conviction is the only thing that can unite me with people or turn me away from them.”

One need not be a psychiatrist to suspect that such vociferous opposition to the private sphere and personal pleasures had something to do with the profound emotional disturbances hobbling Russian intellectuals. This emotional asceticism could be traced in part to the disparity between the harsh realities spawned by quasi-modern Russia and intellectuals’ longing for illusive Western liberties, between the communal bliss promised by socialist theories and the punishing discipline imposed on recalcitrant individuals by the tsarist regime. Hence the moralism, defensiveness, self-loathing, and sarcasm directed toward everyone and everything connected with the status quo.

I find Herzen’s testimony especially moving here. His passion for justice never throttled his instinct for truth; his demanding attitude toward others never blinded him to his personal shortcomings. His humanism is nowhere more evident than in his brutally honest self-indictment, when he ruminates on the price he and his loved ones had to pay for his endless struggles and sacrifices: “We were born to destroy, our business was to weed and tear down, and for that purpose [we had to] negate and ironize—but even now, after we struck fifteen or twenty blows, we see that we built nothing, educated no one. The consequence—or, to put it bluntly—punishment—can be seen in the people around us, in the relations inside our families, and most of all, in our children.” Herzen’s balanced insight was not shared by his successors, who reacted with stinging sarcasm and intolerance toward anyone who did not share their convictions. Herzen spotted this personal style in the Russian intellectuals who visited him abroad, such as Aleksandr Engelston and Sergei Nечаев, as well as his fellow immigrant, Mikhail Bakunin. Herzen wrote disparaging the Petrashevtz, a socialist circle arrested by the Russian secret police in 1849:

This circle included people who were young, gifted, extremely bright and educated, but also irritable, sickly, and broken. . . . Young emotions, bright and cheerful in their origins, were submerged and replaced by pride and jealous competitiveness. . . . They neither knew what happiness was nor cared to nurture it. On the mildest pretext they struck back ruthlessly and treated those closest to them rudely. They did as much damage and spoiled as many things with their irony as the Germans did with their sugary sentimentality.

Needless to say, not all intelligenty personified such qualities. Still, there is enough evidence to be gleaned from their diaries, correspondent, and writings to corroborate Herzen’s testimony. Bred into their bones, where it calcified, rage against autocracy drove the intelligenty toward self-sacrifice and martyrdom, but it also disfigured their personal lives, stole the happiness of those who loved them the most, and left a trail of bitterness in its wake that no hope for the future could erase.
Soul-Searching and Self-Criticism  
Among Intellectuals

By the time the 1860s came to a close, Russian intellectual culture had acquired its familiar traits and every educated person aspiring to be an intelligent started to feel its powerful pull. There was still the question of how to bring Russian reality in line with perceived historical demands. The intelligentsya offered to lead the way, but who would heed the call? According to one Decembrist, “a party of masked men” pouncing on the regal cortege would suffice to set Russia on its modern path. But as Mikhail Lunin (the memorable phrase was his) and the Decembrists roused and turned loose against their oppressors. In the learned, remonstrating on Senate Square was not nearly enough. Then came the familiar saw: the toiling masses—the people—must be roused and turned loose against their oppressors. In the 1870s, the young populists, members of the People’s Will, took to the countryside, where they tried to persuade the peasants that their conditions were much too harsh and that they ought to rise up and make their voice heard. The people were to be led by “the critically thinking personality that understood itself as a possible and necessary agent of human progress.” The populist campaign was the first concerted effort to foment revolution in Russia. Unfortunately, it failed even more ignominiously than the Decembrists’ reckless gamble. The masses did not know what to make of the populists’ clamorous agitation. Rebell ing against the tsar, the protector of the Russian Orthodox Church, seemed to many blasphemous. No wonder some populists were turned in to the police by the very people they had sworn to liberate. A handful of intellectuals were executed and many ended up in jail or Siberian exile, feeding the image—popular or sinister, depending on one’s bias—of the young freedom fighter/nihilist sacrificing his life in the struggle for the people’s happiness.

Disgusted with such political turpitude and embittered by the secret police’s brutal response to their propaganda, the intelligentsya sought to regroup. Some hotheads gave up on spreading the word altogether and resettled to propaganda by deed: bombing the royal family, assassinating state officials, sabotaging official institutions. Dmitri Karakozov’s unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Alexander II in 1866 opened a new chapter in the intelligentsya’s struggle with Russian tsarism. However, by the time the splintering People’s Will managed to hunt down and assassinate Alexander II, the public mood in Russia had swung to the right.

As we saw earlier, intellectual culture in Russia received an impetus from Peter the Great’s drastic campaign to Westernize Russian society. Rational intelligentsya were very well aware of this connection. According to Chernyshchevsky, it was the task of every critically minded intellectual, artist, and writer “to facilitate in every way possible Peter the Great’s cause.” Yet, just as the Westernizers were lurching toward socialism and materialism via left Hegelianism, another faction, the Slavophiles, unfurled its banners heralding Russia’s cultural superiority and unique path among the European nations. Aleksandr Khomyakov, Ivan Kireevsky, Fyodor Tyutchev, and Ivan and Konstantin Aksakov belonged to this influential group, whose members saw the country’s past as laden with religious archetypes bearing good tidings for Russia’s future. What the Westernizers considered signs of backwardness—a weak legal state, abridged personal freedom, a rudimentary market, constricted property relations—the Slavophiles hailed as the country’s traditional strength, in which every Russian should take pride. To the Western preoccupation with the law, the Slavophiles juxtaposed the Russian concern for ethically guided action; the Russian peasants’ preference for communal living, inspired by arrogant humanism; the aversion to private property and competition underscored the Russian peasants’ immunity to bourgeois culture. Even the obedience to the tsar and his servants’ harsh orders revealed the loyalty and patience of Russia’s long-suffering people. This patriotic exegesis that envisioned Russian culture as superior to any Western European model was vividly rendered in Lev Tolstoi’s novel War and Peace. There was a message for the intelligentsya in these Slavophile musings: Stop imitating the West, do not lead Russia into the abyss, learn from the Russian people. Konstantin Leonov, a staunch conservative and dyed-in-the-wool Slavophile, wrote, “[H]e who understands how vitally important the cultural, national style is for our state and what a saving grace it could be for the Slavs to shed the mental yoke of Europe must wish not to enhance the intelligentsya’s impact on the simple folk but, quite the contrary, must look for the best and easiest ways to emulate the muzhik (original emphasis).”

The Slavophiles’ nationalism was laced with irony, for those nineteenth-century Russian patriots owed as great a debt of gratitude to European thought as did the Westernizers. Slavophilism was propelled into being by the romantic reaction to the French revolution as exemplified by Joseph de Maistre, who lived in Russia for a time, where his words and writings enjoyed considerable influence. Slavophilism was especially indebted to the later Friedrich Wilhelm von Schelling. This eminent German philosopher spurned the Enlightenment and rationalism, elevated mystical and irrational intuition as the surest way to discern the divine will and enjoined each “folk” to carry out God’s commandments in its own inimitable fashion. Still, unlike their ultraconservative followers, the original Slavophiles did not deny other nations their special place in world history and urged their compatriots to appreciate other peoples
customs. The point was to find a proper balance between the national and the world historical:

[T]he advocates of Western Europe tout exclusively the European national form [narodnost], which they endow with world historical significance. In its name, they deprive the Russian people of their right to the universally human [obshchechiantsevskoe]. . . But who said that the national view [narodnoe vozrenie] rules out the universal human view? Quite to the contrary. We say “English literature,” “French literature,” “German literature,” “Greek literature,” and that does not bother us. . . Why not grant the same right to the Russians? . . . To deny the Russian people the right to their own national view is to prevent them from partaking in world history.50

The great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky articulated a similar view in his famous “Pushkin speech” in which he tried to reconcile Westernizers and Slavophiles. The speech was delivered on June 8, 1880, in connection with the dedication of a monument to Pushkin.51 It belongs to the venerable Russian tradition, still very much alive, that seeks to fathom Pushkin’s legacy for the present, that is, to decipher the cultural/political message to posterity embedded in Pushkin’s literary corpus. In Dostoevsky’s exegesis, Pushkin went through three stages in his career: (1) a wandering period, when he acted and wrote as a typical Russian intellectual seeking to escape oppressive Russian institutions and find solace in a foreign tradition; (2) a nativist period, when a mature Pushkin discovered that peace was to be found not beyond the country’s borders but in Russian popular culture, in its rich heritage of folk tales and other cultural masterpieces and in the imperial glory secured for the nation by Peter the Great and his successors; (3) a synthetic period, when a wise Pushkin summoned his genius to fuse the native tradition with the cultural riches of other nations. In his talk, Dostoevsky warned the intelligentsia to reconcile Westernizers and Slavophiles.

You consent to be an architect in such an undertaking and remain forever happy . . . if in the foundation of the building there were the suffering of just one, if only the pettiest, being ruthlessly and unjustly tortured to death?53

What makes the Russians different and what Pushkin’s genius revealed beyond reasonable doubt, according to Dostoevsky, was that his countrymen were endowed with the rare ability to empathize with the pain and suffering of all humanity:

Yes, the calling of the Russian is undoubtedly all-European and universal. . . Oh, European nations—they do not even know how dear they are to us! I believe that in the future we, or rather our successors, the future Russian people, will understand to the last person that to be a true Russian means striving to bring about a final reconciliation of European contradictions, to alleviate the European angst in our universal and all-embracing Russian soul, to absorb [umestit] our brethren in it by means of brotherly love, and ultimately, perhaps to say a final word about the great universal harmony, the brotherly agreement among all tribes that live according to Christian evangelical law.54

Flawed though this exegesis may have been (as we saw earlier, Pushkin never completely surrendered his wandering spirit), Dostoevsky rightly sensed a new movement afoot in his land. Indeed, the public was ready to believe that “all our Slavophilia and Westernism is but one great confusion, albeit a necessary one.”55 When the radical intelligentsia began losing its monopoly on high cultural discourse, the intelligentsia began to split into competing camps. Radical intellectuals included old-style populists, anarchists, social democrats, social revolutionaries, and, since the early twentieth century, the Bolsheviks. The liberal camp was mostly inhabited by zemstvo activists, who came from the local administrations elected by popular vote from different social strata following Alexander II’s cautious political reforms. Moderate conservatives with religious interests centered around the Vekhi group, whose leading representatives—Nikolai Berdiaev, Pyotr Struve, and Sergei Bulgakov—grew away from Marxism while remaining committed to personal freedom and parliamentary institutions. There was also a rightist faction represented by Konstantin Pobedonostsev, Leontiev, and their imitators, which championed ultranationalist causes and encouraged the notoriously anti-Semitic Black Hundreds movement to stamp out foreign influence and eradicate the left.

Any account of this period would be incomplete without mentioning Anton Chekhov, a famous playwright and short story writer. The sickly, somewhat reclusive man commanded respect from nearly all intellectual
factions in Russia, even though left- and right-wing intellectuals felt uneasy about his politically noncommittal stance. Chekhov decried the "partisanship and cliquishness" that dominated the contemporary cultural scene and that he found inimical to creativity and fairness: "I fear those who search between my lines in the hope of discovering some tendency and pronouncing me a liberal or a conservative. I am not a liberal, a conservative, a gradualist, a monk, or an indifferentist... My sacred creed is the human body, health, wit, talent, inspiration, love, and absolute freedom, the freedom from violence and lies, whichever form the latter might take." Chekhov's resentment toward the partisan intelligentsia nagging him to choose between political camps would show more of an edge with time. This is what he had to say about left-wing intellectuals a few years before he died: "I do not believe in our intelligentsia, mendacious, sanctimonious, hysterical, bad-mannered, lazy—do not believe it even when it complains and pines away, for its oppressors come from its very depths. I believe only in separate individuals, whether they are intelligenty or muzhiks, for they are a real force, albeit a small one."

The first sentence from this passage has been quoted ad infinitum and remains as popular among today's critics of the Russian intelligentsia as it was early in the century. Yet, it is apt to be misinterpreted as a blanket condemnation of all Russian intellectuals. In fact, Chekhov's views were far more differentiated and complex. His writings are filled with passages where he praises the intelligentsia's selfless work and forthright attitudes. More importantly, commentators tend to overlook the evidence that Chekhov's revolt against the intelligentsia represented a revolutionary turn toward the civic virtues that are so vital to a civilized society, which the Russian intellectuals professed to endorse. "Poviadochnost (decency) and intelligently (moral intelligence) are two terms that, following Chekhov, Russians would use to denote the new attitudes that the intelligenty must cultivate in themselves and display in all life's circumstances. Both words refer to persons who are trustworthy in their dealings, respect people regardless of their status, strive to do justice to an opponent's argument, display professionalism in their work, and seek to practice what they preach. The intelligenty who embody these social qualities possess moral intelligence, a trait by no means confined to people with educational credentials, white collar workers, artists, and the like, but widespread throughout the population. Moral intelligence is not a badge of honor that, once awarded, can be proudly displayed on any occasion: it is a claim to be redeemed, an ongoing accomplishment, an identity that is good only until further notice. Raising oneself from depraved conditions and becoming a morally intelligent person—such is the ideal that Chekhov bequeathed to his compatriots, particularly those aspiring to join the ranks of the intelligentsia:

What if you write a story about a young man, son of a serf, ex-shopkeeper, a high school and college student, brought up to honor rank, to slobber over priests' hands, to genuflect before other people's thoughts, who gave thanks for every piece of bread he received, was whipped repeatedly, walked through wet streets in leaking shoes, engaged in fights, tormented pets, loved to dine with rich relatives, casually lied to God and people just because he felt his nothingness. Write how this young man squeezes the slave out of himself, drop by drop, and how one glorious day he wakes up and realizes that it is not slave's blood coursing through his veins but real human blood.

Chekhov's influence would be felt in many subsequent debates about the intelligentsia. A new element in these debates was the strong accent on intelligentnost ("moral intelligence" is the best translation I can think of here) as a trait distinguishing genuine intelligenty, on the intelligentsia as an ethical rather than a socioeconomic category. Ivanov-Razumnik highlighted this usage in his widely read history of the Russian intelligentsia's political activism, in which he censured those who "equate every 'educated' person with a representative of the intelligentsia, forgetting that no educational certificate can in and of itself turn an 'educated' person into an intelligent." Mikhail Tugan-Baranovsky meant very much the same thing when he wrote. "[T]he term 'intelligentsia' is commonly used here to connotate not so much a socioeconomic as a socio-moral category."

Characteristically, intellectuals with disparate political agendas sought to appropriate Chekhov's legacy for their cause: those on the right cited his harsh words about the intelligentsia; those left of center recited his paeans to civic virtues. We can see this in two influential volumes that appeared a few years after the revolutionary upheavals of 1905-7 shattered the tsarist authorities' confidence and forced the regime into political concessions. One was published in 1909 by several religiously oriented writers under the title Guideposts: Essays on the Russian Intelligentsia (in Russian, Vekhi); the other, The Intelligentsia in Russia, was assembled a year later by liberals as a response to Guideposts.

The first opus launched a frontal attack on the Russian intellectual tradition. Nikolai Berdiaev used the derogatory term intelligentschina (rabid intellectualism) to disparage Russian intellectuals for their "cliquishness," "extreme emotionalism," "political despotism," and "artificial isolation from national life." These qualities, according to Berdiaev and his colleagues, had incited the bloody confrontations between workers and the authorities. Pyotr Struve condemned radical intellectuals who breathed "arrogance and haughtiness" and showed "intolerance to dissent." Such intellectuals liked to strike the proud and offensive pose of savior, to contrast themselves to obyvateli (or down-to-earth citizens) preoccupied...
with their daily routines; yet, their reckless agitation and aversion to acting through normal political venues precipitated chaos and bloodshed.\textsuperscript{63} The intelligentsia displayed religious fervor in its political pursuits, but its "asceticism" and "vacuous heroism" was the obverse of the "patient selfless work" (podvizhnichestvo) expected from a devout Christian, inasmuch as bellicose intellectuals only paid lip service to "the notion of people's equal worthiness, the absolute dignity of each human being."

In "The Ethics of Nihilism," Semyon Frank endeavored to show that the "intelligentsia's entire attitude toward politics, its fanaticism and intolerance, its impracticality and ineptitude in political matters, its obnoxious penchant for factional fighting, its warped sense of the state's mission—all this flows from its monastic-religious spirit, from the fact that its political activities are undertaken not so much to carry out reforms that are objectively useful in a secular sense as to exterminate the enemies of faith and to convert the infidels by force to its own faith."\textsuperscript{65} Mikhail Gershenzon shed light on the intelligentsia's disturbing psychological traits, especially the sharp contrast between its moralism in public affairs and its unscrupulousness in private life. "The intelligentsia's daily life is, on the whole, a terrible mess," charged Gershenzon; its members show "not a trace of discipline, no effort to be consistent even in public (days are wasted God knows how, as the spirit moves them; everything is topsy-turvy); idleness, untidiness, Homeric unreliability in their personal affairs, a naive lack of good faith in their work, an unbridled despotism in politics, a callous indifference toward other individuals, and, before the authorities, sometimes proud challenge, sometimes meek compliance."\textsuperscript{66}

The Vekhi authors had their own list of exemplary Russian thinkers—Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Fet, Tyutchev—whom they praised lavishly for their nonpartisanship, humanistic beliefs, and universal, often religious, values, all of which were conspicuously absent in left-wing radicals. To head off the intelligentsia's dangerous proclivities, the Vekhi writers exhorted their followers to give up their obsession with politics, look deep inside their hearts, and rediscover the Christian faith from which the spirit of justice and egalitarianism so dear to socialists had originally sprung. "For all those who subscribe to this idea, which in my deep conviction, has religious roots," concluded Struve, "it must be clear that the Russian intelligentsia needs a radical perestroika of its socioeconomic worldview. I think that such a perestroika is already under way."\textsuperscript{67}

A year after Vekhi, Russian liberals brought out a volume summing up their political creed. Liberal intellectuals concurred with the Vekhi writers that the left radicals' militancy and partisanship were regrettable, particularly after the 1905–7 upheavals and subsequent reforms opened up the political process, allowing Russian political parties to work together for socioeconomic progress. But the liberals chided the Vekhi critics for seeming to shun politics and disregard the historical context that had exacerbated intellectuals' mores. "[O]ne could not help meeting with disbelief and incredulity this call: be a human being, have faith, learn to love," inveighed Ivan Petrunkevich, "for the inevitable answer is that it is because I treat myself as, and feel like, a human being in solidarity with all other human beings, that I find it necessary to foster the [political] conditions without which human dignity will suffer; it is because I love and have faith that everything that concerns my personal life recedes into the background."

Dmitry Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky noted with satisfaction the movement away from ideologically rigid platforms to a more tolerant attitude toward opponents. "Since the [18]80s, the call for 'nonpartisanship' [bespartiinost] was heard among the intelligentsia, although this nonpartisanship should be understood in an ideological sense, as freedom from the demands of any ideology." He paid homage to Chekhov, whose stance, he insisted, did not mean a wholesale withdrawal from politics. "Among the people who advanced this slogan was Chekhov, who was immediately derided as lacking principles. Now we know that freedom from powerful ideologies does not mean a lack of principles and is far from implying intellectual and social indifference. The intelligent without a definite ideology but with definite principles and a thoughtfully chosen social and political orientation is currently becoming more and more widespread."\textsuperscript{68}

Pavel Milyukov, a historian by training and head of the Constitutional Democratic party, ridiculed extremists' belief in "panaceas, messianic doctrines, and the immediate and decisive role of personal sacrifice."\textsuperscript{70} At the same time, he rejected religious critics' spurious attempts to drive a wedge between the rootless intelligentsia and the patriotic folk, since "the appearance of the intelligentsia is a necessary precondition before a nation can acquire its own self-consciousness. Self-consciousness is a product of consciousness-raising by the intelligently."\textsuperscript{71} Milyukov pointed out that overzealous habits had been forced upon the intelligentsia by oppressive political institutions which left few alternatives to the progressive forces opposed to autocratic rule. The situation changed for the better, he went on, once parliamentary organs began to be formed in Russia after 1905, and it would continue to change in the future, as the Russian political process was funneled into more normal channels: "As its influence grows, the sectarian character of [the intelligentsia's] ideology will weaken, its content diversify, its goals become more specific, its immediate task become more concrete, its pragmatic qualities improve, and its public activity acquire continuity, organization, and systematization."\textsuperscript{72}

Liberal pragmatism seemed at odds with the Vekhi writers' revivalist tone, but the differences between the two should not be exaggerated. Both groups acknowledged that ideological extremism disfigures those
who indulge in it, both emphasized the civilizing effect that the rule of law has on society, and both endorsed reforms carried out through legitimate political channels and urged intellectuals to cultivate civility as a condition for civic society. The primary target audience in each case was the nascent middle class, whose entrance on the political scene had been delayed by the country’s autocratic tradition. Moreover, neither program really implied that the Russian intelligentsia would cease to be a political force. Contrary to all appearances, the Vekhi authors remained squarely rooted in the Russian intellectual tradition—witness their passion for justice, exalted view of high culture, and commitment to public discourse as a vehicle for social reconstruction. They endeavored to rid Russian intellectual culture of its ideological intolerance, emotional violence, and heroic grandstanding, points on which conservatives and liberals saw eye to eye.

Such was the era’s original contribution to Russian intellectual culture. This epoch started with the Slavophiles’ attack on extreme Westernism and Dostoevsky’s critique of the intelligentsia’s rootlessness; it witnessed Chekhov’s appeal for civility and nonpartisanship; and it ended in soul-searching by the Vekhi authors and liberal thinkers. Anton Chekhov was particularly instrumental in exposing the lack of civility among the intelligentsia, its failure to see the link between bourgeois culture and democratic institutions. In rejecting meshchanstvo, Russian intellectuals also rejected the civic virtues undergirding bourgeois democracy: respect for law, private property, and the dignity of other people; willingness to compromise and work through legitimate political channels; cultivation of professionalism in one’s work. Chekhov’s ambivalence toward the intelligentsia reflected the intelligentsia’s own ambivalence about middle-class values. Late-bloomers by world historical standards, Russian intellectuals could see not only the glories of capitalist modernity but also its discontents. The intelligentsia might have been a modernizing force in Russian history, but it also wished to prolong the remnants of communitarianism harking back to Russia’s premodern past. Hence came its philippics against bourgeois philistinism, contempt for obyvateli and meshchniki, dismal work habits, and bohemian unscrupulousness in personal relations. With Chekhov, the Vekhi critics, and liberal intellectuals, Russia began to inch toward psychological modernity, which grounds civic society in civic virtues. Ultimately, lasting social change must encompass both individuals and institutions, whether one starts with oneself or with the political system. Were it not for the Bolshevik revolution, the liberal program of fostering a middle-class culture and civic society in Russia might have succeeded. Unfortunately, liberal critics never got their message across. They remained marginal in the overpoliticized world of Russian cultural politics and soon yielded to left-wing radicalism.

The Intelligentsia Under Soviet Rule

One reason the nineteenth-century intelligentsia tried to shoulder such a heavy load of responsibilities was that it could not find an ally in its strenuous efforts to bring political modernization to Russia. In Europe, the intellectual stratum grew largely out of the bourgeoisie and more or less faithfully served its needs, but the Russian intelligentsia had virtually no ties to the third estate, which did not come into its own until well into the nineteenth century. Before the intelligentsia could liberate any class, therefore, it had to mold it into a self-conscious political entity. If the Decembrists had any claim to stake concerning class representation, it had to do with the gentry’s interests. This claim, made in rather oblique fashion, did have some historical grounds: The Decembrists were committed to liberating their estate from autocratic excesses and to consolidating the gains the Russian gentry made during the reign of Catherine II. For all their republican zeal, however, the Decembrists had no intention of dismantling serfdom; they were also quite content to leave the monarchy in place.

The emancipation schemes favored by the populists were designed to benefit “the people”—the meek, toiling masses believed to be oppressed by the tsarist regime. But the Russian serfs were too amorphous, illiterate, and unself-conscious a social entity to act as an agent of historical change. Liberal intellectuals appealed primarily to the middle class, which stood to gain the most from the intended political reforms. The middle class was an increasingly assertive social stratum at the turn of the century, although its influence was confined chiefly to cities and provincial centers. Conservatives wished to preserve the existing class structure or, better still, revert to more archaic social forms concocted by the conservative romantics’ vivid imagination.

There was also a small Social Democratic party, whose followers embraced the Marxist doctrine, pinning their hopes on wage labor—the proletariat. But their claim to “representing a class” was particularly far-fetched given that industrial workers made up barely 3 percent of the Russian population at the century’s turn.73 Aware that nurturing the Russian proletariat was a long-term project, moderate Social Democrats—the Mensheviks—tried to open up their party and turn it into a mainstream organization with a broad socialist appeal. The party’s radical wing, the Bolsheviks, remained committed to the dogma that envisioned the proletariat seizing power and freeing the country from the parasitic classes exploiting others’ labor. The thankless task of raising the workers’ class consciousness fell to the educated party members, who went about their business much the same way as their populist predecessors, relying primarily on propaganda and agitation but also making...
concerted effort to set up a party organization, train professional revolutionaries, and utilize clandestine publications.

From the start, the Bolsheviks' feelings about the intelligentsia were fraught with ambivalence. Vladimir Lenin and his followers understood all too well that an educated elite had to rouse and lead the masses to the barricades. They also acknowledged their debt to the great tradition of Russia's radical democrats. At the same time, the Bolsheviks went out of their way to distinguish themselves both from populist intellectuals, whose program they found unsuitable for the industrial age, and from liberal thinkers, whose middle-class instincts and preference for discursive means were unmistakably bourgeois. As Lev Trotsky (a Menshevik who later joined the Bolshevik faction) noted in an early article about the intelligentsia, because Russia lacked well-organized socioeconomic groups, radical intellectuals were compelled to act as a "class substitute" and to invest much time in training progressive classes for their final assault on the autocratic state. "However great the intelligentsia's role might have been in the past," Trotsky pointed out, "it will occupy a dependent and subordinate place in the future." Thus, the Bolsheviks declined to count themselves among the mainstream intelligentsia. They saw their party as the vanguard of the working class and reserved no special political role for the intelligentsia in a future socialist society, where intellectuals would simply become a service group distinguished by their education and technical skills.

While in opposition, the Bolsheviks listed basic civil liberties among their political demands. They reasserted their commitment to glasnost after the revolution toppled the tsarist regime in February 1917, using newfangled political institutions to buttress their public image as a radically democratic force. Sometime in the summer of 1917, state institutions began to collapse, and on October 26, 1917, the Bolsheviks seized power. Almost immediately, they ordered the closure of hostile publishing outlets, starting with the conservative press, then spread the ban to liberal newspapers, and eventually disallowed all publications that refused to bow to the Bolshevik dictate. The October revolution (critics would call it a putsch), dealt a major setback to the hopes for democratic reform the intelligentsia had nurtured for decades.

The February revolution had been but a few months old when the mood among Russian intellectuals already began to sour. Gone were the boastful declarations about the bloodless revolution brought about by the selfless intelligentsia. In their place we find laments about the diminished role of culture and cultural workers in society. "A mindless crusade against cultured Russia is raging on," wrote one liberal newspaper in September 1917. "The fist—quite literally—is crushing cultural treasures that it took the nation centuries to acquire. A crusade is being waged against the producers of cultural values—against the Russian intelligentsia doomed to suffer under the autocratic regime and now under the triumphant democracy." Increasingly confused in the face of fast-paced events that overwhelmed the fledgling republic, Russian intellectuals felt disappointed with the "toiling masses" they had helped stir into action. The working people's hostility toward the wealthy and powerful stratum spilled over onto all educated classes. Intellectuals protested that it was wrong to lump them together with the bourgeoisie, that they worked hard as custodians of national culture, and that their labor was indispensable to building a civilized society in Russia, but their voices drowned in the revolutionary din. The Bolsheviks' massive attack on civil liberties stunned the already demoralized Russian intelligentsia. For the first time its members were truly frightened by the revolutionary flames they had so enthusiastically fanned.

Zinaida Gippius was right when she claimed that the intelligentsia was "solidly anti-Bolshevik at the time" and that "the exceptions were very few." Virtually all nongovernment newspapers attacked the Bolsheviks demanding the restoration of glasnost. The nation's leading intellectuals wrote personal letters to the Bolshevik authorities pleading with them to change their misguided course and free citizens arrested on trumped-up ideological charges (the correspondence between the writer Vladimir Korolenko and Anatoly Lunacharsky, head of Narkompros, The People's Commissariat of Enlightenment, is a fine example of this genre). Even some intellectuals close to Lenin were taken aback by his reckless grab for power. Maksim Gorky, an important writer and well-known public figure with links to the Bolsheviks, waged a losing battle against the new regime in the columns of his newspaper Novaja zhizn' (New Life). "Lenin, Trotsky, and their cronies have already been poisoned by power," wrote Gorky on November 7, 1917. "Witness their shameful attitude toward the freedom of speech, the individual, and the sum total of rights for which democracy fought for so long." Rather than mobilizing the national intellectual resources, charged Gorky, the Bolsheviks had declared war on the intelligentsia. Not only were intellectuals losing their livelihood and their rights, they were also terrorized by the rabble pitted against the middle classes by unscrupulous communists. "Something urgently needs to be done. We have to stop the process that leaves the intelligentsia physically and spiritually exhausted. It is time to realize that it is the nation's brain which was never more needed than today." Needless to say, Gorky's newspaper was closed. To his tirade in defense of the intelligentsia, Lenin answered with a well-known quip about those "pathetic intelligentsia, lackeys of capitalism who pride themselves on being the nation's brain. In fact, they are not its brain, they're shit." This motto summed up the views on the recalcitrant intelligentsia.
held by the Bolsheviks during this period. There were concerted efforts to engage intellectuals with valuable technical skills (military officers, railroad engineers, doctors, and so on) in state-sponsored programs, but those with a liberal arts education or a hostile world view were considered a drag on the economy and a dangerous fifth column that had to be neutralized before it began fomenting an opposition. After a brief respite that the communist government gave to the nation in the hope of restoring its economic health, the Bolsheviks renewed their attack on the intelligentsia. In the spring of 1922, Lenin ordered massive arrests among the Bolsheviks’ erstwhile allies, the Mensheviks. Some were deported to Russia’s Far East, some permanently exiled abroad. The Social Revolutionaries met with the same fate in the fall of 1922. The world was startled when in August 1922 the Bolsheviks put the nation’s leading philosophers on a ship (it would become known as the “ship of philosophers”) and sent them into exile in the West, with the promise to shoot anyone who dared come back.81 Pravda printed an article on August 31, 1922, to mark the occasion, bearing an eloquent title: “First Warning.” About the same time, Feliks Dzerzhinsky, the feared head of the secret police, dispatched a directive to his deputy: “Information must be gathered by all departments and funneled into the intelligentsia department. There must be a file for every intelligent. . . . Also, we must keep an eye on all literature in our jurisdiction.”82

The key elements in Communist party policy on the intelligentsia were to assert strict control over “brain workers,” separate the politically reliable from the unreliable intellectuals, instill communist ideology in professional cadres, and raise a new generation of proletarian intelligentsia.83 “We need intelligentsia cadres that are ideologically trained in a certain way,” wrote Nikolai Bukharin, a leading communist intellectual at the time. “Yes, we shall mold intelligentsy, we shall manufacture them as if on an assembly line.”84 Countering the charge that the Bolsheviks had betrayed the intelligentsia’s emancipatory ideals, Lunacharsky wrote that you “cannot expel Bolshevik-intelligentsy from the intelligentsia and dismiss the great role it played in the history of this order.”85 He also noted cynically, however, “The more lacking in ideas the person is today, the more valuable he is. That is to say, if a technical specialist [spets], say, some engineer, has many ideas, it is worse, for these ideas distract a person from his work. But if he has no ideas, we could let him work right away.”86 The Bolsheviks were setting up a social machine in which each cog and spindle was to serve its appointed task, with the intellectuals doing their job as social technicians under the close supervision of the Communist party’s social engineers.

Not all intellectuals immediately rejected the Bolshevik takeover. Some felt that the new regime deserved a chance, that it had to act swiftly to fend off the reactionaries, that civil rights would be restored once the emergency situation eased up. As usual, Russian writers led the way. Vladimir Mayakovsky, Aleksandr Blok, Valery Bryusov, Sergei Esenin, Nikolai Klyuev, Boris Pilnyak, Isaak Babel, and several other prominent literary figures threw in their lot with the Bolsheviks. Poet Bryusov became a censor. Mayakovsky prided himself on dedicating his muse to the proletarian cause. Esenin and Klyuev hailed the revolutionary whirlwind that had stirred the hitherto inert peasant masses into political action.87 Pilnyak and Babel wrote novels glorifying Soviet power’s early years. Particularly intriguing was the case of Aleksandr Blok, Russia’s premier Symbolist poet. Blok greeted the October revolution with a statement in response to a questionnaire published under the title, “Can the Intelligentsia Work with the Bolsheviks?” His answer: “It can and it ought to [for] the intelligentsia bears the same music as the Bolsheviks. The intelligentsia has always been revolutionary. The Bolshevik decrees are the symbols of the intelligentsia. [The latter’s] bitter feelings about the Bolsheviks are a superficial phenomenon, and they are beginning to pass away.”88

Blok’s clumsy attempt to justify the October revolt by invoking poetic symbols of “chaos,” “storm,” and “rebellion” supposedly shared by the revolutionaries and creative intelligentsia provoked a fierce rebuttal from old school thinkers, who accused him of kowtowing to the Bolsheviks, thumping his nose at the rule of law, and betraying innocent victims to be sacrificed to the revolutionary cause. Ilya Erenburg reminded Blok in his article “The Intelligentsia and Revolution” that violent means compromise sound ends and that the lofty slogans deployed by the Bolsheviks could be just a coverup for their ruthless drive to power. Every time I hear slogans like “peace” and “brotherhood,” intimated Erenburg, I cannot help wondering if “they are about to start shooting,” “if I am going to be killed.”89

Blok penned a few more articles on revolution and the intelligentsia and gathered them in a volume bearing the same title, but his enthusiasm for the new regime ebbed as the Bolsheviks stepped up their arrests and expulsions of intellectuals. In his last public speech, he suddenly changed his tune and reverted to time-honored Russian symbols. The occasion could not have been more portentous—the literary gathering commemorating Pushkin’s death. Blok quoted Pushkin extensively, citing the famous lines from the 1836 verse where the poet intimated his subversive wish “for no livery/to bend my neck, my conscience, my belief.” Also recited were Pushkin’s panegyrics to “a secret freedom” that would take on a new meaning for several generations of intellectuals forced to live under Soviet rule:

Love and a secret freedom were my beacon,  
They taught my heart its simple tune,
Blok ended his speech with a thinly veiled warning to the authorities never to meddle with the poet’s secret freedom: “Let bureaucrats face scorn if they wish to guide poetry into authorized channels, if they violate its secret freedom and try to interfere with its mystic destiny.”90 Soon afterward, Blok’s health took a turn for the worse. He applied for a visa to go abroad for medical treatment, but it was denied. After prominent Bolsheviks pleaded his case before the authorities, the Politburo (the Communist party’s ruling organ) reversed its earlier decision, but it was too late. Fading away in a matter of months (doctors were never sure what ailed him), Blok died at the age of forty-one, a few days before the state finally issued him a visa. The prophetic words of his last public speech served as the poet’s own epitaph: “It was not the bullet of Dantes that killed Pushkin. He died because there was no air left to breathe.”92

Blok’s fate was not unique among intellectuals who disfavored the liberal government brought to power in February 1917 and sided with the Bolsheviks after their October takeover either out of conviction or just to see a steadier hand at the helm. Esenin and Mayakovsky committed suicide. Klyuev, Plinyak, and Babel died in Stalin’s concentration camps along with countless communist sympathizers. Even Communist party intellectuals who pledged to weed out the bourgeois intelligentsia and replace it with proletarian seedlings discovered that they were not invulnerable to the anti-intellectualist forces they had set in motion. Nikolai Bukharin, Karl Radek, Yury Pyatakov, Grigory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev, Aleksy Rykov, Khristan Rakovsky, and many others perished in Stalin’s purges. Lunacharsky died of natural causes, but only because he did not live long enough to see the mass purges. Thanks to his expulsion from the country, Trotsky managed to survive longer: he was murdered on Stalin’s order in Mexico, in 1940. The purges came in waves, decimating all classes in Soviet society; among the hardest hit, in relative terms, was the intelligentsia.

Not held in high esteem by Lenin and his comrades, Joseph Stalin went to unimaginable lengths to settle scores with everybody who had ever had the misfortune to doubt his intellect and moral intelligence. In the mid-1930s, he unleashed an unprecedented campaign against the party brass, setting cadres with working-class backgrounds against old-time party theocrats.93 By far the most sensational public trial staged by Stalin’s henchmen was directed against the so-called Rightist-Trotskyist bloc, featuring as star defendant Nikolai Bukharin, once designated by Lenin as the party’s leading intellectual. As one reads the ridiculous charges leveled against the defendants, hears the obsequious praises they heaped on Stalin, and recoils at the way they abased themselves hoping to save their own lives and those of their relatives, one realizes that the absence of glasnost is not the worst thing an intellectual can face. Although Bukharin found courage to deny some of the charges brought against him, he confessed to monstrous crimes he never committed:

I admit that I am guilty of treason against the Socialist fatherland, the most heinous of crimes possible, of the organization of kulak uprisings, of preparations for terrorist acts, and of belonging to an underground, anti-Soviet organization. . . . The severest sentence would be justified, because a man deserves to be shot ten times over for such crimes. . . . I kneel before the country, before the party, before the whole people. The monstrosity of my crimes is immeasurable, especially in the new stage of the struggle for the USSR.94

This was the last public statement Bukharin ever made. He knew that his life was about to end, yet he was praising his mortal enemy (“in reality the whole country stands behind Stalin; he is the hope of the world; he is a creator”), because there was still a glimmer of hope—not for himself but for his loved ones held hostage by Stalin. Kolos, glas, glasnost—the root morpheme is always “voice,” the ability to utter, make sense, express oneself. It is this gift of free speech that Lenin and Stalin took away from the people. Worse still, Stalin forced people to say things they did not mean, things they found repugnant. The voicelessness enforced by the autocratic tsars seemed like bliss compared to the perverse glasnost of Stalin’s reign: “People gifted with a voice faced the worst possible torture. Their tongues were ripped out and they had to praise their master with the bloody stump. The desire to live was irrepressible, and it coerced people into this form of self-annihilation just to extend their physiological existence. The survivors were as dead as those who actually died.”95 These words belong to Nadezhda Mandelshtam, the widow of Osip Mandelshtam, arguably the greatest twentieth-century Russian poet, who perished in Stalin’s concentration camps. Nadezhda Mandelshtam’s memoirs are among the most riveting accounts of the intelligentsia’s subterranean existence in this macabre age. She wrote about the Russian intelligentsia, who were brought up to revere the spoken word, who made major strides made toward free expression, and whose members woke one day in a different country, where the free word had become a capital offense. While some intellectuals publicly attacked the revolutionary decrees curtailing glasnost, other chose to lay low in hopes that Bolshevik rule would not last. In the end, they all were condemned for their “negative attitudes,” which earned them the reputation of a reactionary force in the eyes of the new authorities. Since the state quickly asserted its m
making the intellectuals’ capitulation easy. It spared no effort in showing monopoly over employment, intellectuals had little choice but to cooperate with the regime.

"Is there anybody among us," wrote Zinaida Gippius, another survivor from this era, "the most farsighted and incorruptible person imaginable, who is not haunted by the memories of the compromises we were forced to make during St. Petersburg’s captivity, who did not plead with Gorky for something or other or eat stale bread from our enemies’ hands? I know the taste of such bread, this accursed ration, as well as the feel of Soviet money in my hands." The Soviet government had no intention of making the intellectuals’ capitulation easy. It spared no effort in showing them who was boss, in drumming into their heads the conditions of submission, for which they would be rewarded according to the sincerity of their obeisance to the state—compromise," wrote Nadezhda Mandelshtam. "There is one more thing I can add: Do not bring children into this monstrous world.""98

Writers and artists found it particularly hard to silence their consciences, "I harbor no hatred toward anybody—that is my ‘precise ideology,’” wrote Mikhail Zoshchenko in 1921.99 These words would be dredged up twenty-five years later by Andrei Zhdanov, a party hack in charge of Soviet art and ideology who publicly humiliated the writer for his conciliatory stance and alleged counterrevolutionary sentiments. When Yury Olesha talked about the psychological difficulties that intellectuals faced adjusting to the new regime, he became a symbol of the “rotten [zniliia] intelligentsia” and subjected to endless derision as an ideologically unstable element (II and Petrov’s fictional intelligent Vasialyu Lokhankin bore some traits reminiscent of Olesha). "I seize my own self, reach out to strangle that part of myself which suddenly balks and stirs its way back to the old days," wrote Olesha; "I wish to stifle that second ‘self,’ and the third self, and every ‘self’ that comes to haunt me from the past.”100 Vladimir Mayakovsky described the arduous labor of fitting an old self into the new Soviet ideology as “stepping on your own song’s throat.” His own labor continued until the moment he finally sent a bullet through his head. Maksim Gorky was never forced to do penance in public, for he was too much revered by the Bolsheviks as the first proletarian writer; but when he yielded to tempting invitations and returned to Russia from his exile in Italy, he found himself increasingly isolated, mistrusted, and ignored. Soon after his son was murdered by the NKVD (a KGB precursor), Gorky died under mysterious circumstances—but not before he paid his tribute to the glories of the Stalinist system, the founder of “socialist realism” in literature and the chief “engineer of human souls.”

The Bolsheviks stopped exiling their enemies abroad in the early 1920s, although a handful found their way to the West in the mid-1920s. About the same time, officially sponsored trips abroad by Soviet citizens were drastically curtailed (Mayakovsky committed suicide soon after he lost his traveling privileges, when the authorities began to suspect his loyalty). Those who missed the last train or did not wish to taste the stale bread of emigration were forced to collaborate with the regime. Sometime in the early 1930s, poet Boris Pasternak acknowledged that Soviet power was well entrenched, that the Russian people seemed to have sided with the communists, and that it was time for writers to accept the inevitable.101 Osip Mandelshtam, who worked for various Soviet publications, called himself "a Bolshevik without a party card.”102 Mikhail Bulgakov assured the NKVD that he considered the Soviet regime “extremely stable,” that he had “sunk strong roots in Soviet Russia,” and that he could “not imagine himself as a writer outside” his homeland.103 Marina Tsvetaeva, who returned to the Soviet Union after seventeen years in emigration, had to swear her political correctness and the loyalty of her husband, who was arrested by the NKVD soon after his return ("[My husband] served his homeland and the communist idea with his soul and body, word and deed.").104 Anna Akhmatova, whose husband, poet Nikolai Gumilyov, was executed by the Bolsheviks and whose son languished in the Gulag, had to repent in public after being vilified for writing apolitical, decadent verses. Mikhail Zoshchenko contributed stories to Lenin’s hagiography and visited the infamous Baltic–White Sea canal project, where political prisoners were used as slave laborers. Yuri Olesha penned essays about the happy family of Soviet people and took part in the campaign against composer Dmitry Shostakovich. And these were the best and the brightest, individuals whose personal courage, indomitable spirit, and creative accomplishments—despite their outward obeisance to the state—would be an inspiration for generations to come.

But it would be an oversimplification to dismiss the conversion experiences of some as nothing but protective mimicry. “Mandelshtam,” wrote his widow, “always tried to make up his mind freely and check his objective judgment of history.”105 The cognitive dissonance between their actions and their beliefs, exacerbated by enforced unanimity, wore many down into eventual acceptance of what appeared to be an objective judgment of history.

We should also resist the temptation to erect too sharp a divide between the innocent intelligentsia bludgeoned into collaboration with the
regime and the latter’s faithful servants. There were many communists, state officials, and lowly bureaucrats who never completely surrendered their "secret freedom" and were perturbed by Stalin’s atrocities. We find numerous, often grudging, references in memoirs from this era to the helping hand that this or that Soviet official offered beleaguered intellectuals in times of trouble. It could be Anatoly Lunacharsky, head of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment, which supervised communist education and propaganda, who bombarded the Politburo with letters demanding an exit visa for Blok and helped dozens of intellectuals to leave Russia when that was still possible. Or it could be the lowly clerk arranging a ration card for a hungry writer and declining to report his angry mutterings to the secret police. "These were people who did quite well ‘up there’ but who did not forget their old friends. Some of ‘us’ are still alive thanks to their efforts.”

Whether they were on good terms with the regime or languished at its margins, intellectuals led a double or triple existence, thinking one thing to themselves, saying another within earshot of family and friends, and saying and doing something else in public. This multilayered existence left a profound mark on Soviet intellectuals’ psyche. They could pride themselves on their “secret freedom,” but they also knew that they were compromising their consciences. The pattern familiar to us from the time of Pushkin and Chaadaev blossomed in the Soviet Union, where doublespeak and double-think were perfected to an art form. Just consider Mandelshtam’s 1934 verse bitterly renouncing Stalin and his 1937 poem praising the tyrant. Bulgakov’s novel The Master and Margarita satirized Soviet society, but the same author wrote a play, Batum, extolling Stalin’s virtues. Pasternak’s Doctor Zhivago could not erase his verses about Joseph Stalin, the nation builder. Anna Akhmatova, a proud spirit steadfastly squelching every temptation to collaborate with the regime, wrote a poem glorifying Soviet Russia’s spectacular accomplishments. Most of these writings are unexemplary and better left unread (although Mandelshtam’s 1937 "Ode to Stalin” is a work of rare poetic power). Some were written under duress (Akhmatova hoped her verses would buy amnesty for her son), but all testified to the torturous existence led by the Soviet intellectual burdened with conscience and memory.

Even in this eerie age, however, there were certain standards of morality within intelligentsia circles. When Stalin telephoned Pasternak and questioned him about Mandelshtam, who had recently been arrested by the NKVD for his anti-Stalinist verse, Pasternak answered that he did complain about Mandelshtam’s arrest and that his friend should be released. No, he did not confront the tyrant; he did not tell him what a disgrace to humanity he was or put him on notice that there was a special place reserved for him in Dante’s ninth circle of hell. But Anna Akhmatova and Nadezhda Mandelshtam rightly concluded in their postmortem of this conversation that, under the circumstances, Pasternak’s behavior “merits a solid ‘B’ grade.” Agonizing about one’s actions in morally charged situations, evaluating and reevaluating an individual’s conduct under trying circumstances, would become a sad pastime for Soviet intellectuals.

Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin, a famous nineteenth-century satirist, formulated a classic question facing the Russian intelligentsia: What is to be done when there is nothing you can do? As Soviet experience showed, there were things intellectuals could do to salvage their battered consciences. This is the advice Arkady Belinkov offered in his book about Yury Olesha, a brilliant study indispensable to understanding the psychology of the Soviet intelligentsia: “The worst thing an intellectual can do [while working for the system] is to strive to do his base duty with distinction, better than others, to be the top student.” In other words, one had to do as little damage to others as possible, take on only such assignments as could not be evaded, and do private penance among friends for one’s less than commendable deeds. Mikhail Svetlov joked, “An honest person is one who never does anything dishonest, except when he is forced to, and who is disgusted with himself every time he does do something dishonest.”

Irony, sarcasm, black humor, and anecdotes parodying official symbols would become indispensable weapons in the arsenal of the Soviet intelligentsia struggling to maintain a degree of critical distance from inane Soviet realities. Irony is a clue that what seems to be going on is only a front, not to be confused with the true, private self hidden beneath the official uniform. Ironic detachment is worn like a merit badge (or a stigma, depending on how you look at it) that the individual uses to highlight his difference, to let an alternative spiritual reality gleam through the debased discourse. We have seen how this behavioral gambit was used by nineteenth-century intellectuals to rather mixed effect. The Soviet intelligentsia used the same technique.

Nadezhda Mandelshtam recalled her encounters in the early 1920s with Ilya Erenburg, when “he looked on everything as if he were a stranger … and hid himself behind ironic omniscience. He had already figured out that irony was the weapon of the helpless.” We find brilliant examples of irony and satire in Viktor Shklovsky’s novel The Zoo, in Mikhail Bulgakov’s Master and Margarita, and Mandelshtam’s Fourth Prose. Arkady Belinkov lampoons Soviet reluctance to admit that there might be problems in this most perfect of all possible worlds: “Even in our days, though extremely rarely and only in extraordinary situations, minor contradictions sometimes arise between our bad artists and our wonderful society. Those minor and instantly resolvable contradictions usually arise in connection with the slight incongruity between socialist realism and realistic socialism.”

Any Soviet intellectual—or any experienced censor—would immediately recognize such overextended official rhetoric as an irreverent ges-
tured toward official Soviet ideology, which is why none of the works mentioned were published in Stalin's Russia. Written in secret and kept away from outsiders, sometimes even from family and friends, such works should be seen as surviving monuments to "secret freedom," Pushkin's and now the Soviet intellectual's last solace. As for irony, this ultimate weapon of the spiritual proletariat, it was directed mostly at relatives, colleagues, and friends, who bore the brunt of bitterness and alienation that creative spirits suffered in the land of perverted glasnost. Memoirs from this period tell us about the price intellectuals paid for their survival, about their collective "traumatic psychosis," as Nadezhda Mandelshtam called the phenomenon, although we are already familiar with it under the name "terrible ulcer" that Chaadaev gave to it in the nineteenth century. Subsumed under these terms are abnormalities encysted in a psyche that suffered intellectual abuse firsthand or witnessed the ideological bloodbath from afar. A silent witness, points out Igor Kon, a sociologist who survived Stalinism, was worse off in some ways, particularly if he was young.112 The helplessness and terror experienced by the children whose parents were declared "enemies of the people" induced a trauma they would not be able to shake for life. This grim legacy of political purges will remain with the Russian intelligentsia for some time to come.

The Stalinist era made few original contributions to Russian intellectual culture. It only exacerbated certain traits that were already present during the tsars. Its legacy was apparent in the ever-widening gap between word and deed, in the perverted glasnost imposed on the population by NKVD inquisitors, in intellectuals' spiritual withdrawal ("inner emigration"), in the off-putting interpersonal style aimed at negating fear and debunking official realities through exaggerated irony and sarcasm, and the resultant syndrome of self-loathing displayed by intellectuals alienated from society, from each other, and from their public selves. Stalinist social technologies stifled the personal voice, drove private feelings inside, installed false consciousness in place of freely chosen convictions, and replaced the curative powers of dialogue with the numbing force of propaganda. It would take decades for Russian intellectual culture to free itself from the Stalinist legacy. This process even now is far from complete, although it began many years ago, during the ideological "thaw" that Russia experienced after Stalin's death.

The Intelligentsia and the Thaw

The first step toward sheering Russian intellectual discourse of its Stalinist diction was taken not by an intellectual but by the uncouth, boorish Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin's protégé and temporary victor in the struggle for power that followed Stalin's death.

In 1956, Khrushchev gave a speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in which he denounced Stalin and his terrorist tactics. The speech was secret and the speaker was mainly preoccupied with the plight of innocent communists devoured by the Gulag, but its effect was felt by the entire country. In 1961, at the Twenty-second Party Congress, Khrushchev reaffirmed his commitment to the rule of law, to democratic procedures within the party, to greater freedom for artists, and to improving the welfare of the population as a whole. The "society that was ready to recoil from past horrors and grant its members greater leeway. Khrushchev might not have realized what he was setting in motion, but the seeds of glasnost that he planted survived his reign, sprouted in underground intellectual bunkers, and in time, sapped the communist regime's vitality to the point when it was ready to collapse.

Ever since the Bolshevik takeover, a debate had been raging inside and outside Russia as to whether the old Russian intelligentsia were dead and whether it could be brought back to life. According to Georgy Fedotov, one of the most perceptive historians to study the subject, "The intelligentsia that was decimated by the revolution has lost its meaning and cannot be resuscitated."113 Other writers disagreed, arguing that the old Russian intelligentsia might be dead but the new one, bearing a strong family resemblance to the prototype, would no doubt emerge. Fedotov himself was ambivalent in this regard; at the end of his career he called for a new "intellectual elite" that could rejuvenate Russia.114 Whether or not the intellectuals who called themselves intelligentsia in post-Stalin Russia are related to the old intelligentsia, these intellectuals took pride in calling themselves by this word that commonly had been used as a term of derision in Stalin's time, and they were eager to trace their lineage to their illustrious predecessors and continue their emancipatory work. I cannot do justice here to the diverse intellectual currents that sprang to life in this heady era, but I will try, using broad brush strokes, to paint the major ideological divides along which intellectuals arranged themselves during Khrushchev's thaw and beyond.

The de-Stalinization campaign awakened a great many intellectuals, who realized that the Soviet regime was an aberration. What they could not agree upon was whether socialism was the culprit or just its Stalinist incarnation. Most liberal intellectuals who chose to collaborate with the regime tried to humanize it through painstaking education designed to expose Stalinist excesses and turn the country toward democratic socialism. In his path-breaking book, which set him on a collision course with the authorities, Andrei Sakharov, Russia's leading dissident, spoke about "the moral attractiveness of the ideas of socialism and the glorification of labor, compared with the egotistical ideas of private ownership and the glorifica-
tion of capital," leaving no doubt as to his own sympathies.116 Vladimir Lakshin, a widely read liberal critic, described in very similar terms the ideals that animated him and his colleagues at Novy mir, a premier literary magazine in post-Stalin Russia: "But we believed in socialism as a noble ideal of justice, we believed in a socialism that was human through and through and not just with a human face. We regarded the democratic rights of the individual as incontestable."117

The key element in the program advanced by Sakharov and his liberal followers was glasnost and intellectual freedom, that is, the need to bring all political issues to an open forum and the right to voice one's opinion on any policy matter. From the start, the intelligentsia set out to work within the law, since Khrushchev's reforms contained the implicit promise that one could criticize past mistakes and offer fresh ideas for the future. "The democratic movement," asserted Andrei Amalrik, "intends to operate under the rule of law and glasnost and to work for glasnost, which distinguishes it from small and big underground groups."118 "Glasnost, honest and unabridged glasnost," insisted Solzhenitsyn, "such is the first condition of every healthy society, including ours. Whosoever does not want glasnost for our society is indifferent to his homeland and thinks only of himself. Those who do not wish glasnost in our society wish not to cure its ills but to drive them deeper inside where they can fester."119

In 1962, Novy mir published Solzhenitsyn's powerful novel, One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, in which the author, drawing on his own experience in the Gulag, related a political prisoner's daily routine. Khrushchev personally approved the publication, and rumors swirled about the Lenin prize waiting for the author. But the prize went to somebody else, Khrushchev was deposed, and Leonid Brezhnev's conservative regime came to power, dashed hopes for further liberalization. This is when the ideological scales began to fall from the intelligentsia's eyes, and the democratic movement went underground. At this very point, a rift surfaced within the ranks of the intelligentsia, one that is still apparent today. It separated intellectuals who chose to continue working for liberalization through official channels and those who gave up on reforming the system from within.

Among those who took the second route were Andrei Amalrik, Valery Chalidze, Aleksandr Volpin, Pyotr Grigorenko, Vladimir Bukovsky, Vladimir Maximov, Natalya Gorbanevskaya, Viktor Nekrasov, and a few dozen other activists. Their program centered around human rights and the need to hold the Soviet government accountable for its deeds. The idea, which is sometimes attributed to Volpin, seemed simple and unimpeachable: The government must respect its own laws, as well as the international covenants it has signed. The point was to spotlight cases where the state violated legal procedures and to bring the weight of public opinion to bear on the culprits: "We do not have to obey anything but the law. We must defend our laws from abuse by the authorities. We are on the side of the law. They are against it."120 Demonstrations ensued; petitions were dispatched to the top; courts where political dissidents went on trial were picketed by democratic movement activists, who demanded the glasnost in courtrooms guaranteed by the Soviet law. These courageous efforts drew public attention to the fact that local Soviet authorities routinely used extra-legal means against independent trade union activists, harassed religious worshipers, curtailed political prisoners' rights, and violated the freedoms of speech, political gatherings, and emigration guaranteed by the UN Human Rights Charter, which was signed by the Soviet Union in 1975.

Compelling as the idea behind it was, the democratic movement petered out after several years of fruitful work that exposed to the world numerous abuses by Soviet authorities. The movement's activists vastly underestimated the government's resolve to stamp out political dissent and the KGB's ruthlessness in clamping down on the nonconformist intelligentsia. Soon after Nikita Khrushchev was deposed, the new regime put liberals on notice that it would not tolerate open dissent. In early 1966 the authorities staged the first political show trial of the post-Stalin era, sending Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuly Daniel to prison for publishing their works in the West without state approval. More trials followed. Some democratic movement activists were imprisoned, others sent into internal exile, still others forced to emigrate.

Alongside the democratic movement, other intellectual currents were gathering momentum that advocated ethnic minorities' rights, religious freedom, artistic freedom, freedom of emigration, and so on. Of particular note among these groups was the movement initiated by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and his close friend, Igor Shafarevich. Both writers sought to revive the nationalist themes that had lain fallow since the Slavophiles introduced them into public discourse, giving special emphasis to "the traditional ancient Russian notion of pravda [truth] as an expression of justice that is superior to any formal law."121 Solzhenitsyn took issue with Sakharov's notion that intellectual freedom and human rights were key to social reconstruction in Russia:

Look farther ahead, look at the West. Surely, the West is awash in all sorts of freedoms, including intellectual freedom. Did that save it? Today we can see the West: its will paralyzed, sinking fast, oblivious to the future, its soul neurotic and enfeebled. In and of itself, intellectual freedom cannot save us... The absolutely necessary task [facing us] is not political liberation but the liberation of our souls from participation in the lies imposed on us.122
Borrowing from the Vekhi platform, Solzhenitsyn decried the democratic movement's preoccupation with politics and scolded Russian intellectuals for neglecting their national roots. The Russian intelligentsia would have to reinvent itself, he insisted; it had to be reconstituted around "a morally intelligent core [intelligentnoe jadro]" distinguished not by its members' scientific degrees, number of publications, years of schooling...but by the purity of their striving, by their willingness to make a spiritual sacrifice—for truth and, most of all, for this country where one lives."123 Solzhenitsyn called the Russians to "national repentance" and urged his fellow citizens not to cooperate with the regime or, to use his memorable line, "live not by the lie.”

One more important intellectual shoot broke through the infertile Soviet ground in the post-Stalinist era. It was championed by the creative intelligentsia, mostly writers, like Andrei Sinyavsky, Yuly Daniel, and Joseph Brodsky, who were fed up with politics, shunned official society, and pursued free aesthetic expression. Those who shared this creed had as exalted a view of the artist's place in society as had their nineteenth-century radical predecessors, but they did not want to see art and literature become playgrounds for conflicting ideologies. Whatever literature had to teach society should not be taught through moralizing and didacticism. Here is how Joseph Brodsky framed the idea: "Books became the first and only reality, whereas reality itself was regarded as either nonsense or nuisance. Compared to others, we were ostensibly flunking or faking our lives. But come to think of it, existence which ignores the standards professed in literature is inferior and unworthy of effect. So we thought, and I think we were right...The intuitive preference was to read rather than to act," Brodsky went on. "No wonder our lives were more or less in shambles."124

With certain qualifications, though, the same could have been said about any person striving to be morally intelligent under the increasingly oppressive conditions in Russia. By the mid-1970s, the Soviet government had opened a frontal attack on dissent of all stripes, confronting the Russian intelligentsia with the familiar conundrum: What is to be done? Understandably, the loyal liberals who came into their own in the 1960s (they are still commonly referred to in the intelligentsia parlance as shestidesiatniki, the generation of the 1960s) had a very different idea about their mission in society. Efim Etkind, a scholar and literary critic, confronted head on the dilemma that Solzhenitsyn presented to his countrymen: "Aren't the absolute refusal to compromise and the unconditional determination to pursue truth and defend human rights always show moral maximalism," which is especially dangerous given the current political climate. No dissident acts in a vacuum; his choices affect other people who might suffer gravely when the individual decides to take a heroic ego trip.128 Solzhenitsyn, Etkind charged, vastly overestimated the public's interest in challenging the authorities and seriously underestimated the fact that "enlightenment must precede [political] renaissance, [that] underground publications are not sufficient...The first task is to teach, educate, and enlighten. To participate in this centrally important—indeed only—relevant activity in our time, we should be ready to conceal our limits."129

Lakshin's rebuttal to Solzhenitsyn was even more forceful. Lakshin charged that the eminent author snubbed his colleagues at Novyi mir, that his "indifference to means, his psychology of the pre-emptive strike, his cruelty and lying" reflected his prison camp experience, that "Solzhenitsyn had also imbibed the poison of Stalinism," and that "the author who ad-
dresses us with his passionate appeal to pursue truth, humanity, and good-

ness scorning observing these commandments in his own con-

front. Meanwhile, liberals in good standing with the government had to voice

publicly endorsed the invasion), look the other way when Sakharov was

relied on the time-honored “secret freedom” (renamed “inner freedom”) to

knew that the intelligentsia suffered after Khrushchev’s demise. Soviet intellec-

tuals coping with the adversity in the post-Stalinist era reminded one of

Spanish Jews forced to choose between their faith and the official state

could not help but lose track of their private and official identities. The recourse to irony seemed natural. “In

the atmosphere of mendacity,” recalls a veteran of those years, “all-con-

suming irony becomes a universal self-defense mechanism.”

Brezhnev regime entered the stagnation years and open dissidence was

the intelligentsia’s collective consciousness—vanguardism, moral maximalism,

but failed. Yet their creative energies, and played havoc with their private lives.

If the Russian intelligentsia learned anything in the post-Soviet period,

it was to mistrust the leftist radicalism that shaped the nineteenth-century intel-

lectuals. The break did not come easily or swiftly. “You see,” a mem-

ber of that intelligentsia recalled, “for all our irreverent dissidence (ina-

komysli), our hearts responded with emotion to the old [communist] symbols, images, and commandments, which—miraculously and in spite of everything—retained for us the purity of that original flame.”

Even seasoned fighters and internal émigrés with no illusions about the regime

resorted to the communist lingo in an effort to explain their ways, as did

Brodsky during his 1963 trial, when the prosecutor pressed him to

demonstrate how his lifestyle meshed with the Soviet people’s efforts to

build a communist society: “Building communism is not just operating

the machine and plowing the earth. It is also the work of the intelli-

gentsia, which ...”—that is as far as the judge permitted the future

Nobel laureate to take his argument. But by the mid-1970s, when the

Brezhnev regime entered the stagnation years and open dissidence was

silenced, the liberal intelligentsia began to slip from its socialist moorings.

The preoccupation with moral intelligence inched its way back into exist-

e. Soviet intellectuals sought moral fortitude in the works of

Pushkin and Chekhov, placing on their agenda “the acquisition of a ‘secret

freedom,’ through one’s own intellectual and moral effort.” Camus’s “Myth of Sisyphus” captured the intelligentsia’s imagination as emblematic of its hopeless existence amid official hypocrisy and corruption. With increased repression came thoughts of emigration (an option that virtually disappeared in the late 1970s) and a longing for the West and distant cultures. “It was not just political anecdotes and irreverent songs that sustained us in those years. It was not just the irony that became the signature trait of our spiritual makeup. It was also the longing

for Paris, which we had no chance to see—ever.” As before, intellec-

tuals turned their bitterness and anger against themselves and their loved

ones. The moral compromises, forced voicelessness, fear of cracking

under KGB pressures explain the ambivalence that post-Stalinist Russia

and the intelligentsia it engendered continue to elicit in intellectuals who

lived in this muddled era.

As for Russian intellectual culture, it did undergo some changes during

this period. Khrushchev’s thaw left an indelible mark on the new genera-

tion of Soviet intellectuals evident in their skepticism about socialist ide-

ologies, their renewed belief in glasnost as a condition for social recon-

struction, their willingness to take a public stance, and their narrowing of

the gap between word and deed. Other features ingrained in the intelli-

gentsia’s collective consciousness—vanguardism, moral maximalism,

ironic detachment, contempt for meshchanstvo, belief in literature’s trans-

formative role—remained largely unaffected, though. If anything, violent

emotions, self-loathing, and standoffish demeanor were exacerbated be-

cause there was a clear choice, albeit an unpalatable one, between the re-

pression awaiting those who dared to stand up to the authorities and the

emigration. Lakshin had a point when he charged his esteemed col-

league, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, with reproducing totalitarian stratagems

in his own conduct. But did liberal intellectuals free themselves from this

syndrome? The test came as Mikhail Gorbachev opened the final chapter

in Soviet history.

Perestroika and Beyond

Neither “glasnost” nor “perestroika” are recent inventions. Both terms have a long pedigree in Russian intellectual history. Count Pyotr Vyazemsky, a friend of Pushkin, hailed glasnost and decried its absence in Russia as early as 1831. Later, Herzen, Dobrolyubov, Chernyshevsky, Ivanov-Razumnik, Milyukov, and other Russian intellectuals identified
the right to voice one's opinion on the full range of public issues as indispensable for a healthy society. The same applies to “perestroika,” which was invoked by politically conscious Russian intellectuals to highlight the importance of making a radical break with past beliefs and practices and setting the country on the path toward political modernization. What made Mikhail Gorbachev’s usage different was that he invoked both terms simultaneously and employed them to advance a liberal rather than radical political agenda.

The Soviet leader came to power in April 1985. Within a year he was talking about the need for glasnost in politics and perestroika in the economy, but ideological blinkers were still on tight. Few people inside or outside the Communist party took Gorbachev’s musings seriously; they had seen too many government-instigated campaigns peter out in the past. Skeptics notwithstanding, the new rhetoric took wing, generating unprecedented changes in Soviet domestic and foreign policy. That perestroika had plenty of substance could no longer be denied after political prisoners were set free, censorship eased, political dissent tolerated, and emigration allowed to resume; disarmament talks steamed ahead beyond ril expectations. The first signs that the intellectuals were taking Gorbachev seriously came about a year and half into his tenure, as some journalists tested the limits of glasnost by bringing up topics previously excluded from public debate. Aleksandr Vasinsky wrote a pioneering article, “The Ballad of Different Opinions,” in which he urged that all opinions, including those we passionately oppose, be given the benefit of the doubt. To add extra weight to his argument, Vasinsky dug up a rare quotation from Lenin in which the founder of the Soviet state chastized those who “spread hatred, intolerance, contempt, etc., toward dissenters [nesoglasnomylyshchie].” Following Vasinsky, other intellectuals picked up kindred themes with fewer and fewer references to the communist luminaries. “One of the conditions of honesty and directness that our time demands,” asserted Sergei Averintsev, a leading Russian philologist, “is to stop confusing the dissenter [nesoglasnyi] with the enemy. The intelligentsia must nurture in itself the culture of dissent [kultura nesoglasia], the culture of debate. Not just weak tolerance, but true respect for the opponent.”

By 1988, the communist hierarchs realized that Gorbachev’s changes had gone too far and started pressuring him to slow the reforms. Immediately, the intelligentsia swung into action, claiming an equal partnership in the reform process. Khrushchev failed to carry out his reform, intellectuals maintained, largely because he turned his back on the intelligentsia and neglected to tap the intellectual resources that had proved indispensable in his earlier struggle with the party hierarchy. The man who started the political thaw after Stalin’s death “paid dearly for his mistrust and contempt for the intelligentsia,” charged Fyodor Burlatsky, a former Khrushchev aide, in a statement echoed by many shestidesiatniki. This was a thinly veiled warning to the new administration to engage the intelligentsia, to make it a full partner in the reforms. Poet Andrei Voznesensky predicated the success of social reconstruction on the nation’s ability to mobilize its intellectual resources and to deploy culture and moral intelligence, two areas in which Russian intellectuals have traditionally claimed special expertise: “A spiritual revolution is stirring in our land, a life and death struggle for a new thinking against the still powerful inertia of the past. This is not a cultural revolution, but a revolution by Culture. . . . Born again is the old Russian word glasnost, the word that makes active repentance a norm and that goes back to Tolstoi, whose ideal of fighting evil with active conscience has such resonance today.”

Perestroika reignited the old debate about the intelligentsia, its place in the reform process, the linkage between the old and the new intelligentsia, and the troubled relationship between the intelligentsia, the people, and the state. For the first time, the intelligentsia had a chance to settle old accounts, regale with its survival stories, expose the enemies of nonconformist intellectuals. Many established scholars, writers, and artists expressed remorse, or were called upon to repent by their colleagues for past action or inaction. Relishing their newly found freedom and capitalizing on their access to secret archives, intellectuals delved into areas once excluded from public discussion: the famines, economic failures, environmental disasters, forced collectivization, mass purges, Gulag culture, persecution of religious and ethnic minorities. . . .

Intelligentsia searched their illustrious pedigree, owned up to their past mistakes, and drew heavily on the Vekhi critique, which exposed the Russian intelligentsia’s unsavory practices. Following Chekhov, intellectuals hailed moral intelligence [intelligentnost] as a defining characteristic for anyone claiming membership among the intelligentsia’s ranks. A highly respected Russian scholar, Dmitry Likhachev, told an interviewer that “an unschooled peasant can be called an intelligent, but the same cannot be said of a ruffian, even if he is burdened with intellect, scientific degrees, and official honors. . . . ‘Russian intelligent’ designates a spiritual and moral, rather than cerebral, category. Better put, unless movement of the heart precedes movement of thought, a person cannot be called an intelligent.” This wording suggests a shift in focus away from the intelligentsia as a corporate group that marked the official Soviet perspective.
and toward intelligentsia, or moral intelligence, as a personal disposition and a pattern of conduct displayed in a particular situation. This theme looms large in a posthumously published note by Aleksei Losev, a celebrated Russian philosopher and survivor of numerous campaigns against the intelligentsia. The title of Losev's article could be freely rendered, "On Feeling, Thinking, and Acting as an Intelligent." In this remarkable piece, the author discusses moral intelligence as a way of life and a peculiarly Russian ideology that "appears out of nowhere, all by itself, acts without understanding its own action, pursues the well-being of humanity, and does so without any clear idea of its actions. The true ideology of true moral intelligence is naive." The intelligent, continues Losev, never socially indifferent, is acutely aware of the world's inanities and is determined to "transform reality"—a "person who takes the interest of humanity as his own." Moral intelligence is "conscious spiritual labor to improve oneself and to make the world around us rational." The true intelligent is not utopian dreamer but can critically assess reality and knows when to act, when to lay low, where and how to pick a fight. In time, moral intelligence becomes self-reflexive and more assertive. The labor of moral intelligence is the work of reason in history carried out by a particular individual who fights the day's brush fires with sights trained on destiny, which is to be a civilizing force in history. The life of moral intelligence is subject to all the vagaries of everyday life; it is tragic, heroic, and beautiful at the same time.

These ruminations about the intelligentsia's mission in society fall squarely within the Russian intellectual tradition. The all-important difference, however, is that intelligence is perceived here as a moral agency par excellence and the intelligentsia is cast as a social force whose mission is not to drag the unwilling society along a preordained historical path but to ameliorate it via public discourse and personal example. "Jesus Christ," suggested one participant in the ongoing debate about the intelligentsia, "was in essence a prototype of the intelligent." The latter is akin to an individual who is "born again" and who strives to be righteous rather than impose a particular scheme on society (from which it follows that "calling oneself an intelligent is like giving oneself a medal". This and similar statements have familiar messianic overtones, but they are also refreshing insofar as their critical thrust is directed at oneself rather than others. Note, however, that the intelligentsia's commitment to moral means did not slow its enlistment in government-sponsored institutions—ministries, think-tanks, state committees, and other organizations that in the past had been closed to Russian intellectuals practicing moral intelligence. Russian intellectuals took full advantage of the new opportunities. Once intellectuals weaned on hatred toward the state found themselves working for it, they discovered that their ideals did not mesh easily with the demands of power. As Chekhov surmised a century ago, the intelligentsia was hardly immune to the ills of the Russian bureaucracy, from whose head it originally sprang. The way intellectuals in power acted amid the rough and tumble of Russian politics in the Gorbachev and especially the post-Soviet era changed many minds about the intelligentsia's touted virtues.

Never before did the intelligentsia enjoy a greater influence in their homeland than during the heyday of perestroika. Gorbachev's reforms assured intellectuals the right to free speech, unprecedented artistic freedom, wide access to the mass media, and a chance to be elected to the Soviet legislature and to serve in government. In addition to the rights commonly found in capitalist societies, Russian intellectuals still benefited from the largely socialist system, which guaranteed full employment, required little work, and subsidized the intelligentsia's creative pursuits. Thus, throughout the perestroika years, movies continued to be shot, books published, concerts given, research projects publicly funded—all with little regard for the fact that there might be no market for the resulting products. No wonder perestroika received such accolades from the intelligentsia. "There is no doubt," Natan Edelman, a well-known Russian historian, wrote in 1989, "that the intellectuals' support for perestroika is virtually unanimous." Obviously, things could not go on like this for any length of time without a major shakeup, and when it came, the intelligentsia's fortunes sank quickly.

Simply put, for the intelligentsia, glasnost was perestroika. It was common for intellectuals giddy from reforms to opine that if they had to choose between glasnost and sausage they would not hesitate to take the former and forget the latter. For economically more vulnerable social groups, however, perestroika was less of a promise than a threat mounting daily in the increasingly volatile economic environment. The perestroika movement reached its high-water mark in 1989, when political forces in Russia became increasingly polarized. In 1990, the ideological middle ground seemed to evaporate and Gorbachev's political base shriveled to a dangerous point. Whereas his constituents on the left felt irritated by Gorbachev's refusal to dismantle the one-party state, his constituents on the right urged a return to the relative stability provided by the socialist economy. A year later, the situation in the country resembled the disarray that followed the February 1917 revolution. Communist party stalwarts staged a coup against Gorbachev in August 1991, cracking the whip one last time to see whether the Soviet citizen's old reflexes still worked, but it was too late. The failed putsch delayed Gorbachev's exit from the political scene by a few months, but by the end of 1991, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had ceased to function, and there began a dramatic reversal of fortunes for the Russian intelligentsia.
The woes that have befallen the intelligentsia in post-Soviet Russia are heavy indeed. The Academy of Sciences had no money to pay its scholars; those who could find employment abroad were already leaving the country in the early 1990s, while their lesser-known colleagues had to look for supplementary employment in the still fragile private sector. The artistic unions that in the past had supported Russian filmmakers, actors, writers, painters, musicians, and others fortunate enough to belong to the so-called creative intelligentsia had lost their state support and could no longer furnish members with lucrative contracts and commissions. Scores of artistic companies, including the world-famous Bolshoi Ballet, went into bankruptcy or teetered on the brink. "Thick" literary journals and high-brow newspapers that had boasted circulations in the millions during perestroika saw their press runs dwindle to a few thousand copies. The Russians, who used to pride themselves on being a nation of readers, theatergoers, music lovers, and art exhibit aficionados, seemed to have lost interest in high culture, as attested by empty theaters, poorly attended shows, unsold books, and so on. To add insult to injury, the intelligentsia was held responsible for every mishap Russia faced after Gorbachev came to power. And of course, there was no longer an overbearing state to kick around, to blame for the intellectuals' misfortunes. The powerful state that the intelligentsia had fought tooth and nail lay in ruins, with the Russian house of intellect buried under its rubble.

The bitterness the intelligentsia once harbored toward the authorities is building up again, but this time its animus is directed against itself. "I detest being an intellectual," confided Aleksandr Panchenko, a prominent Russian scholar and public thinker with liberal credentials. Another well-known writer, Aleksandr Ivanov, told the interviewer who dared to address him as an intelligent: "Please do not call me by this disgusting name. I never considered myself an intelligent and always viewed this term with contempt." If Lenin ever was right, added Ivanov, it was in his assessment of the intelligentsia as the nation's excrement. Stanislav Govorukhin, a film director, concurs with this assessment, as do several other writers with Slavophile leanings, who desire to restore Russia's former glory. The anger enciphered in such statements has raised the temperature of the debate about the intelligentsia, which has fallen again into the old habit of showering opponents with sarcasm and innuendos. It is hard to explain what it really is: a mean-spirited, petty rivalry, venomous factionalism that sickens all against each, an unscrupulous envy that breeds endless intrigues. It is sycophancy, libel, informers, the deliberate feeding of ugly passions, nerves perpetually set on edge, and a moral degeneration that makes a person or group run amok. Squabbling is a natural state for people who are rubbing against each other in a dungeon, helpless to resist the dehumanization they have been subjected to. Squabbling is the alpha and omega of our politics. Squabbling is our methodology.

The situation is hardly helped by the fact that now everyone is free to say whatever they like and everybody is talking simultaneously without much regard for their interlocutors or a concerted effort at a real dialogue. The bloody confrontation between Yeltsin's government and the recalcitrant Russian Parliament in October 1993 amplified to a deafening point the over-acidulous invectives Russian intellectuals had been trading since the Soviet Union's demise. The whole situation is eerily reminiscent of the emotional malaise that afflicted the Russian intelligentsia after each previous revolution and that provoked the Vekhi authors' monumental inquiry into the Russian intelligentsia's wayward lifestyle. "Nine-tenths of our intelligentsia is afflicted with neurasthenia," wrote Mikhail Gershenzon, one of the sanest voices in Russian intellectual history, whose insight rings as true today as it did ninety years ago. "There are almost no normal people among us—everybody is acerbic, withdrawn, restless faces contorted in a grimace, because one was either crossed or saddened... We infect each other with bitterness and have so saturated the atmosphere with our neurasthenic attitudes toward life that a fresh person, say, one who lived abroad for a while, could not help feeling suffocated in our midst."

In this din, voices that heed Chekhov's call to civility and emotional sanity, respected voices such as Sergei Averintsev, Dmitry Likhachev, Marietta Chudakova, Viktor Sheinis, and Yuri Levada, use glasnost not to drown out opponents' views but to further dialogue; they continue to urge the return to sanity in public discourse. What draws these very different authors together is the realization that there is more to democracy than constitutional guarantees and representative institutions, that civil society begins with civility, that Russia will continue on its downward path until its citizens can see that, to paraphrase John Dewey, democracy literally begins at home. Marietta Chudakova's article published in Literaturnaja gazeta on the eve of the Soviet Union's collapse is as good an example of a clear-headed attitude toward the current chaotic situation in Russia as can be found in recent literature. Chudakova reminds her readers about Olga Fridenberg, a cousin and lifelong friend of Boris Pasternak, as well as a highly regarded scholar of ancient Greek literature, who had this to say about Russian intellectual culture shortly before she died in 1956:

"Everywhere, in all organizations and homes, a nasty squabble [skloka] is raging, the poisoned fruit of our social order, a new concept hitherto unknown to civilization and untranslatable into any other language. It is hard to explain what it really is: a mean-spirited, petty rivalry, venomous factionalism that sickens all against each, an unscrupulous envy that breeds endless intrigues. It is sycophancy, libel, informers, the desire to unseat a rival, the deliberate feeding of ugly passions, nerves perpetually set on edge, and a moral degeneration that makes a person or group run amok. Squabbling is a natural state for people who are rubbing against each other in a dungeon, helpless to resist the dehumanization they have been subjected to. Squabbling is the alpha and omega of our politics. Squabbling is our methodology."
The irritability, intolerance, and aggressive demeanor obvious today, Chudakova argues, stem from old habits intellectuals are unable to shed. Now that the ideological husks have been peeled away, the raw anger and bitterness are no longer hiding under the veneer of respectability and politeness. The difference between the past and present discourse, according to Kama Ginkas, a stage director, is the same as between “a philosophical fireside chat and philosophizing with your thumbs slammed in door jamb.”153 The need to pour bitter irony and sarcasm on one’s opponent is even more painfully obvious today than in Russia’s recent past. Stanislav Rassadin calls it “slovenly irony”; Yury Polyakov laments “the total ironism” that pervades Russian culture today, and Evgeny Shvedov decrees “the endless jocularity, the coy and empty irony” that fills the pages of literary magazines.154 Add to this the devastating impact that market pursuits have had on old friendships, the loss of relatives, colleagues, and friends to emigration, the precipitous decline in the public’s interest in high culture, persistent economic uncertainty, anti-intellectualism fanned by the political right, and you will have the picture of a malaise that plagues the intelligentsia’s psyche.155 It is as if someone had suddenly removed the ferment from the perestroika brew, making the drink go sour and giving imbibers a monstrous headache. Intercut with the bitterness widespread among the Russian intelligentsia today is the nostalgia for the good-old-bad-old days before perestroika, when its members knew exactly what they were fighting for and against, when people clung to every word an artist uttered, when there was hope. Some now saw the empire’s vices, including the hated censorship, the necessity to speak an Aesopian language and create with no chance of an audience, as hidden virtues.156 Not surprisingly, Aleksandr Pushkin’s verse on Fyodor Demonti is quoted ad nauseam, its author portrayed as “perhaps the freest man in Russia’s entire history,”157 and his “secret freedom” touted as the last refuge of the intelligent.

Is this the beginning of the end for the Russian intelligentsia, as many authors inside and outside Russia argue? After all, this ideological order has accomplished its main goals: the overbearing Russian state has been cut down to size and political absolutism broken, glasnost reigns supreme, and Russia is firmly set on its path toward political modernization. As a historical force bearing the birthmark of its premodern origins, the intelligentsia must yield center stage to professional politicians, market-conscious artists, and state bureaucrats. But its historical mission has not been accomplished yet. There is still the unfinished agenda of psychological modernization, of developing a civic culture, which the intelligentsia must take up and which calls for moral as well as emotional intelligence.

Georgy Fedotov saw silence, quietude, holding back one’s feelings as a signature trait of Russia’s spirituality.158 Much of what is valuable in Russian culture, he maintained, comes from this accumulation of emotional and intellectual energy, already evident in early Russian monks. As I have tried to show in this chapter, such voicelessness has a darker side. Too often it has been an involuntary, forced silence that deprived humans of glas and glasnost, drove their negative feelings inside, and turned their anguish on themselves and others. The emotional abuse that Russian intellectuals casually heap on each other these days is a sure sign that they and their predecessors were themselves abused. All those who survived the Stalinist purges, intimidation by the KGB, or ideologically inspired violence of any kind could not help being deeply troubled by their experiences—particularly if they capitulated by becoming eyes, ears, voices, and hands for the state.

Russian intellectual culture continues to evolve, and there is much of value in it—models of rational, moral, and emotional intelligence that could help Russians rid themselves of regnant obsessions and find the via media between facile intellectualism and emotional excess. The agenda for the day is to focus the intelligentsia’s attention on its own emotional life, to help it comprehend the distorted communications behind Russian intellectual culture, to make it understand that democracy is also a quality of experience, a sociopsychological culture outside of which democratic institutions cannot sink roots and are sure to wither away. In short, one must balance intellect with emotional intelligence and see to it that emotions are intelligent and intellect is emotionally sane.159

Notes

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7. See Nahimy, *Russian Intelligentsia*, pp. 36–49.


12. Ibid., p. 201.


15. Ibid., p. 60.


23. Ibid., p. 770.


29. Ibid., pp. 373–74.

30. Ibid., IV: 401.


38. Ibid., II: 81.


42. Belinsky to V. P. Botkin, June 13, 1840, and Belinsky to N. A. Bakunin, November 7, 1842, both in Belinsky, *Izbrannye pisma*, II: 81, 201, respectively.


45. See Nahimy, *Russian Intelligentsia*, pp. 69–86.


48. Isaiah Berlin had this to say about Tolstoi’s view of the Europeans and their Russian imitators: “Tolstoy looks on them as clever fools, spinners of empty subtleties, blind and deaf to the realities which simpler hearts can grasp, and from time to time he lets fly at them with the brutal violence of a grim, anarchical old peasant, avenging himself after years of silence, on the silly, chattering, town-bred monkeys, so knowing, and full of words to explain everything, and superior, and impotent and empty.” Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, p. 64.


52. Ibid., p. 139.
89. Ilya Erenburg, “Intelligentsiia i revoliutsiia,” Literaturniaia gazeta, no. 10 (March 9, 1994).
92. Ibid.
95. Ibid., p. 778.
97. Gippius, Zhiznie itsa, p. 41.
105. Mandelstam, Vtoriaia kniga, p. 231.
107. Joseph Brodsky once told me that he considered this poem among the very best Mandelstam ever wrote.  
108. “Why didn’t you plead for your friend?” Stalin asked Pasternak. “If my poet friend were in trouble, I would have climbed the wall to save him.” Anna Akhmatova, “Listki iz dnevnika,” in Serebrianyi tek, p. 422.  
113. Belinkov, Sdacha i gibel, p. 382.  
114. Fedotov, Sudba i grekh Rossi, I: 100.  
115. Ibid., II: 206–27.  
123. Ibid., p. 251.  
125. Solzhenitsyn, Bodalsia telenok, p. 603.  
128. Etkind cites his own example. In the foreword to his book on poetic translation, Etkind wrote that foreign poets had been lucky with Russian translations of their works because these were often done by outstanding poets in their own right, like Pasternak and Mandelstam, who were discouraged from writing and publishing their own poetry. Ibid., p. 234.  
129. Ibid., p. 249.  
130. Lakshin, in Glenny, Solzhenitsyn, Tvardovsky, and Novy mir, p. 61.  

135. Makarov, “Inye vremena.”  
137. Makarov, “Inye vremena.”  
144. Dmitriy Likhachev, “Nelegkaia nosha akademika Likhacheva,” Moskovskie novosti, September 18, 1988. The words are a partial paraphrase of Likhachev’s by the interviewer, A. Chernov.  
147. Natalya Ivanova, “Prezentatsiia apokalipsisa, ili kto ne uspel, tot opozdal,” Literaturanaia gazeta (September 8, 1993).  
158. Fedotov, Sudba i grekh Rossi, II: 175.  