SOVIET CIVILIZATION AND ITS EMOTIONAL DISCONTENTS*

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Abstract

This study is based on the premise that Soviet civilization represented a concerted effort to harness emotions to an ideological cause, to reshape human affect according to the Communist Party's political agenda. Even though these efforts largely failed, they left deep scars on the Russian psyche. The emotional culture that evolved during some 75 years of Soviet rule continues to persist after the coercive institutions supporting it have broken down, and this inertia greatly complicates the transition to a democratic society in Russia.

The long-standing Western tradition cast emotions as sensations or sentiments one could not help feeling under certain conditions. The expressions like "being carried away," "flying off the handle," "yielding to a passion," "getting caught in the grip of emotions" are meant to convey the inexorability with which emotions could force themselves upon us and turn a rational individual into a victim of irrational affect. But our language also allows us to say that the person "worked himself into a frenzy," "let it all hang out," "made up a scene," "whipped up emotions" — expressions implying an active subject, a self-conscious agent who uses emotions strategically. In the traditional discourse about emotions, both popular and scientific, one is likely to inquire what causes an emotional outburst, which affect corresponds to a given emotional episode, how a particular sentiment helps the individual adapt himself to the situation. The alternative reckoning favored by interactionist sociologists compels us to ask what reasons one has for a present emotional display, how it is related to the self, whether one is justified in signing a given emotion in the

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present social context. Both perspectives raise the question of meaning, yet each suggests a different hermeneutical strategy for an answer.

Traditional psychology follows classical hermeneutics in its assumption that emotion is an event that means something quite apart from the individual who experiences it. This meaning is largely a product of biological evolution that outfits primates with the ability to react expediently to critical situations with a response-mobilizing affect. Emotions are explained as natural events that need have no intent behind them and that serve no other purpose than to help the organism adapt to the situation.

The socio-psychological perspective, by contrast, calls for a nonclassical hermeneutics and implies that emotions must not just be explained but interpreted, that is to say, understood as cultural events, normative displays, or symbolic acts carried out by self-conscious actors in social situations where emotional performances are imbued with meanings by the participants in accordance with social rules. To ask what does the emotion mean, we have to know the situation where it occurs, its larger socio-historical context, the subject’s self-image, purpose at hand, and long-term interests, as well as the inquirer’s agenda. This shift toward the nonclassical hermeneutics of emotions parallels the broader paradigm shift in social science that favors agency, interaction, and interpretation as explanatory tools.¹ Nonclassical hermeneutics no longer assumes that the meaning resides in a cultural artefact like sacred text, waiting to be objectively rendered; rather, it casts it as an historically and situationally emergent event that reflects the Zeitgeist, the author’s intent, as well as the interpreter’s bias. In the same vein, the contemporary hermeneutics of emotions has to grapple with agency, interactional context, and cultural significance that the participants attach to their own and each other’s emotional performances.

The studies conducted in the last two-three decades make a solid case for the sociology of emotions.² What we have learned from this fast growing literature is that emotions are more than affective states,
Epiphenomenal byproducts of our basic drives. Among other things, emotions appraise the situation, situate the self, altercast the other, provoke feelings, dramatize sentiments, motivate conduct, reenforce values, and facilitate change. Recent studies have taught us that emotions remain incomprehensible outside their socio-historical context. Whether it is an emotion of accidie found among medieval monks who lost their devotional zeal, or the emotion of amae that encourages the display of humbleness and dependence among the Japanese, or the emotion of song signifying righteous anger among the people of Ifaluk—we are apt to miss its significance if we treat the emotion in question outside the cultural milieu where it found its expression.

Pressing an argument one step further, we can postulate that culture must be emotionally vested. Cultures do their work by colonizing our bodies, stirring up emotions, molding our actions and thought. By the same token, body, mind, emotions exist *qua* human body, mind, and emotions only to the extent that they are socially constituted. Or as pragmatists would put it, culture is embodied just as body is encultured. Radicalizing Gordon's notion of emotional culture, we can say that culture that has no way of engaging our affect is an abstraction. As a theoretical construct, it has its use, but as an empirical phenomenon, it is shorn of some of its essential content.

The present inquiry into the hermeneutics of emotions explores the interplay between Soviet culture and emotions. It is based on the premise that Soviet civilization represented a concerted effort to harness emotions to an ideological cause, to reshape them in a systematic fashion consistent with the political agenda articulated by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Even though these efforts largely failed, they have left deep scars on Russian psyche. The emotional culture that evolved during some 75 years of the Soviet rule continues to persist after the coercive institutions supporting it have broken down, which, in turn, greatly complicates the transition to civic culture and democracy in Russia.
I am particularly interested in the Soviet intelligentsia and its emotional bearings. Forced to partake in the official discourse and defend values contrary to their heartfelt beliefs, Soviet intellectuals responded to the normative pressure with various emotional stratagems. Some of these (emotional overloading, guilt-mobilization, ritualized hatred, identity mortification) helped prop up the existing system; other strategies (simulation, dissimulation, irony and sarcasm) subtly undermined official Soviet culture. To be sure, the Soviet intelligentsia's emotional profile differed from that of other social strata, but it also magnified patterns germane to the master culture. By focusing on the intelligentsia and its emotional life, we can better understand Soviet emotional culture as a whole. The latter has not fallen by the way side and is very much alive. It is likely to persist for a while, as Russian people grapple with their past and search for alternative values.

This study formulates a research agenda rather than proffers definitive results. It leaves unattended several relevant issues, such as the emotional underpinning of national character, the continuity and change in Russian emotional culture, the convergence of affect structures in Soviet and other quasi-totalitarian cultures, the limits that human nature places on efforts to manipulate human affect, etc. I hope to return to these issues in the future. Meanwhile, I offer some observations on Soviet civilization and the demands it placed on the human psyche, talk about the socialization of emotions in the Soviet Union, examine the affective response to the system's demands, survey the current emotional climate in Russia, particularly as it comes across in its intellectual strata, and finally, reflect on the impact that Soviet emotional culture might have on democratic reforms in Russia.

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Everywhere, in all organizations and homes, a nasty squabble [skloka] is raging on, 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 the rival, deliberate feeding of ugly passions, nerves perpetually set on edge, and moral degeneration that makes a person or a group run amok. Squabble 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. Squabble – is the alpha and omega of our politics. Squabble – is our methodology.  

This statements, made in 1956, belongs to Olga Fridenberg, a prominent Soviet scholar, a keen student of ancient Greek literature, and an astute observer of Soviet mores. As an alienated Soviet intellectual, Fridenberg expressed sentiments common in her social strata that was coming into its own during the Khrushchev’s Thaw. What appeared to Fridenberg as the reign of ugly passions, however, was nothing but a commendable zeal in pursuit of the communist cause, when judged by official standards. The Stalinist ideology deliberately heated up the emotional climate in the land, as it set out to achieve its supreme goal – raising the New Soviet Man.

Like all revolutionaries, the Bolsheviks started with the social structure. Their doctrine pictured human nature as *tabula rasa* or an infinitely malleable product of historical forces. Once the state machinery was seized, the new laws written, and the economy set on the socialist path, the Russian Marxists figured, humans would shape up accordingly: brotherhood, good work habits, and enthusiasm for the public cause would naturally ensue. But reality proved otherwise.

After all the blood and gore, the citizens of the new socialist state failed to heed the communist slogans. Some were down-right hostile to the new regime, others scrambled to take advantage of the chaos in the country, and most went about their business as usual. This is when the party theoreticians discovered that the old system entailed not just political machinery and economic institutions but also a mode of thinking, feeling, and acting, deeply rooted in its members' personal identities and suffused with their intimate emotions. Indeed, the social structure is encoded in the self, and to dislodge it, to replace it with a new system, one has to turn to social psychology. Which is what the Bolsheviks did as they tinkered with human feelings at the
grassroots level—through the network of public schools, propaganda institutions, and mass prison camps.

To fill the gap between theory and practice, Soviet Marxists invoked concepts like "birth marks of capitalism," "ugly vestiges of the past," and "capitalist belching," which blamed the slow pace of reform on the inertia of the historically obsolete social forms. Combating such vestiges was the task entrusted to communist pedagogy—a elaborate doctrine that promised, within the span of one generation, to stamp out the Old Russian Man and to replace him with what was known in the official Marxist parlance as the "New Soviet Man."

According to Trotsky, "To publish a new, improved edition of Man—this is the next task of communism." A prominent theoretician of this era, Lev Zalkind, declared that the psychology's agenda is the "mass construction of New Man," while Anton Makarenko, who emerged in the 1930's as the country's leading pedagogue, introduced his "pedagogical science" in the following way: "We should take as our task the formation of that type of behavior, those characters and qualities of personality, which are necessary for the Soviet state."

What were these "characteristics and qualities?" A devotion to the communist cause, unswerving commitment to the Communist Party's leaders, hatred toward alien social classes, a revolutionary vigilance toward the hidden enemies of the state, readiness to sacrifice personal needs to the public good, ability to enjoy work for work's sake, enthusiasm for collective gatherings and a ferocious appetite for Soviet rituals. This is by no means a complete list, but it should not be difficult, following the etcetera clause, to extend it at will. What is particularly interesting for us is the heavy emphasis on the affective sphere made by communist pedagogy. Reason alone could not do the trick; building communism was a Herculean emotional task to be undertaken with sincerity and verve. There was little room left for detachment, levity, and irony when the organismic involvement had be at or near the maximum level. Those who refused to throw
themselves into building communism with all their hearts were suspect in being indifferent or hostile to the cause. To be sure, the New Soviet Man was supposed to be "happy." But this was not so much a right as a duty, and an onerous one at that, since the onset of communism had to be repeatedly postponed and the material conditions of everyday life were getting from bad to worse.

Soviet pedagogy evolved sophisticated techniques designed to mobilize its charges' affect. Among the most salient features of the Soviet educational system were guilt mobilization, love withdrawal, collective reenforcement, and the diffusion of maternal responsibility. Every Soviet citizen had to enlist into an age-specific organization designed to cultivate politically correct feelings. Already at nursery school and in kindergarten, children were taught to think of themselves as "grandchildren of Lenin," the founder of the Soviet state, who was depicted as an amiable grandfatherly figure bringing toys and candies to the kids. From the first through third grades, Soviet schoolers belonged to the Octobrist group, so named after the month of the Bolshevik revolution. Next came the Young Pioneers organizations, followed by the Young Communist League that included members aged 14 to 28. Then there were numerous sports clubs, neighborhood associations, trade union committees, and finally, for the very earnest and emotionally dedicated -- the Communist Party, the paragon of emotional intelligence, Soviet style.

Each organization had its own objectives and exercises which placed heavy emphasis on communist symbolism, socialist rituals, and emotionally charged displays. As the young pioneer, you had to attend political meetings, take part in ceremonies where freshly-minted members were sworn to dedicate themselves to the communist cause, and engage in a variety of public works. All young pioneers were told the story of Pavel Morozov, a young lad who renounced his father, an opponent of forced collectivization, to the authorities. After his father was sent to the Gulag, the enraged relatives killed his son. Pavel Morozov became a role model for young
pioneers, a martyr to the communist cause whose love for the communist state took a precedence over the familial feelings. Spy on your parents, inform on the enemies of the people, sacrifice your life for the cause if necessary – such was the message sent to all Soviet children, thousands of whom emulated Pavel Morozov’s heroic deed.

The child brought up in this inescapably collectivist milieu was likely to grow up a conformist, shying away from unapproved beliefs, politically incorrect feelings, and deviant selves. An example comes to mind, perhaps an extreme one, that graphically illustrates the public ostracism Soviet society was prepared to fan on the outcast. It involved the wife of a dissident, Yuri Orlov. When she came to attend her husband’s political trial that was closed to the public, she was ordered to go through a strip search. She had to disrobe in front of three male police officers who told her they were searching for weapons (tape recorder was probably what they were looking for). You could look at this humiliating procedure as a paradigm for guilt mobilization and self-mortification awaiting all those foolish enough to set their noses against the omnipotent state.

On a smaller scale, all Soviet citizens had to, on one occasion or another, go through a ritual degradation ceremony where the individual was symbolically stripped naked and then forced to don the official identity-garb. In every class room, at office meetings, party gatherings, to say nothing of court rooms and show trials, somebody was paraded emotionally naked before the jeering public and ordered to repent for one’s real or imaginary sins against the collective. Even where no charges were brought up against the person, citizens were expected to reveal voluntarily their failings. "Criticism and self-criticism" – this is how this practice was officially designated, and it was a matter of political and sometimes physical survival for the wayward comrades, who chose to confess minor transgressions before the Party denounced them for major deviations.

These social technologies had a profound impact on the emotion work performed by Soviet citizens. Emotional labor would be a more apt term, for it hints at the emotional surplus meaning systematically
extracted by the state from its members, condemned to work overtime in Potemkin-portable villages and dramatize the official reality as the only meaningful one. It was imperative for a Soviet citizen in the high-Stalinist era to learn how to turn their emotions on and off at will. Whether they were displaying enthusiasm about their leaders' latest pronouncements, showing outrage about the alleged enemies of the state, or parading in a mass demonstration—the Soviet citizen knew how to mobilize affect and dramatize the sincerity of their commitments to socialist ways. Sometimes the situation required a resort to simulation and dissimulation: displaying feelings one did not feel and covering up emotions one actually experienced. For some, feigning and lying would become a routine practice: "Without lying I wouldn't have survived in those horrible days. I lied throughout my life—at work, to my students, to my acquaintances whom I couldn't trust completely, and those were the majority... [Such] was the common mendacity of our age, the commonplace politeness of sorts. I am not ashamed of those lies." Others found this practice of simulation and dissimulation disturbing. The system might have prescribed class hatred toward "socially alien elements," but not everyone could readily suppress compassion for those branded "enemies of the people" or their children sent to special prison schools for reeducation. "Even now, as I look back at my thinking, I am ashamed of myself," confided another survivor of this era. "I shied away from the truth [and] publicly repented, trying not to go beyond certain limits of decency." 

But for most Soviet citizens, double-think was too dangerous a game, too heavy a burden. To avoid cognitive dissonance, many squelched politically incorrect feelings altogether by bringing their emotions and beliefs in line with their prescribed behavior. It was indeed hard to avoid the hysteria of mass purges and escape the paranoid climate instigated by the "great humanitarian," Joseph Stalin. His own affective behavior offered a paradigm for his party comrades and the nation at large. Mild mannered, understated, almost conciliatory in big public gatherings, Stalin could turn venomous and foul-mouthed in smaller venues where he confronted his comrades
with diatribes and violent emotional outbursts. If he did not mince words dealing with Lenin's wife (Lenin broke up with Stalin over this episode and advised the Party Congress to relieve him from his duties in his last will), why would he do so with lesser beings? At each level of the Soviet machinery the pattern would be repeated: an amicable display of camaraderie suddenly yielding to the emotional violence heaped on subordinates. This emotional roller-coaster taught everyone to manage one's impressions with great care and precision, lest someone peeks through the veils and discerns the underlying lack of conviction. And if you were caught in the emotionally unguarded moment without a proper mask, displaying doubts about this best possible of all worlds, or worse, actively sneering at the system, you were cast into an emotional purgatory. Even the bravest souls caught during Stalin's witch hunts had to renounce their private selves and don official identities.

"I am kneeling before the country, before the Party, before the whole people," pleaded Mikhail Bukharin, the star witness at the at 1936 anti-Trotskyites show trial, "The monstrousness of my crimes is immeasurable. [But] what matters is not the personal feelings of a repentant enemy, but the flourishing progress of the U.S.S.R. and its international importance."14 One after another, defendants facing absurd charges and clumsily fabricated evidence would rise to debase themselves, praise their tormentors, and deliver to the public their emotional offerings:

It is especially painful for me to stand before the people, the broad masses, as a betrayer of my country, as a traitor. . . . When I begin to analyze my crimes and wish to find mitigating circumstances, I cannot, amidst my dastardly crimes, find anything to mitigate them. . . . I shall accept the most severe sentence, but I find it inexpressibly hard to die when I have at last cleared myself of this filth, of this abomination.

I sincerely repent. I suffer burning shame, particularly here in Court when I learnt of and understood the entire counter-revolutionary baseness of the crimes of the gang of Rightists and Trotskyites, in which I was a hired assassin. We have been quite rightly called enemies of the people, traitors to the fatherland, spies and assassins.
I have committed loathsome, vile, and heinous crimes against the country and the people, and perfectly realize that I must fully answer for them before the proletarian court. . . I deserve no mercy.

I stand disgraced. The nationalist organizations have been smashed. The accused 'block of Rights and Trotskyites' have been smashed. This is to the glory of our country. . .

The shameful example of my fall shows that the slightest rift with the Party, the slightest insincerity toward the Party, the slightest hesitation toward the leadership, with regard to the Central Committee, is enough to land you in the camp of counter-revolution [and bring you down] branded with the shameful stigma that marks the foreheads of all of us.15

Many of the defendants in these show trials were intellectuals, members of the Soviet intelligentsia. They were expected to articulate the Party's platform and present it in a convincing fashion to the populace. In many ways, these were role models for the other social strata. What happened to this social group is most indicative of the heavy emotional toll that Soviet civilization extracted from its victims.16

To begin with, the intelligentsia occupied a precarious political niche in the Soviet hierarchy. From the start, it was hobbled by what Erving Goffman would call a "spoiled identity."17 The old Russian intelligentsia was comprised of scholars, bureaucrats, jurists, artists, and literary people who received education under the old regime. This fact alone cast a long shadow over the intelligentsia's status, for it lacked direct links with the proletarian classes and owed its living to the bourgeois state. Gnilaia [rotten] intelligentsia was the popular term of derision directed against intellectuals under the Bolshevik regime. Numerous novels were written at the time painting the image of an intellectual as a vacillating, unreliable, traitorous being who could use some proletarian drubbing to mend one's wayward habits. The fact that most Bolshevik revolutionaries came from the same strata did not bother the ideologues, who fancied themselves proletarian at heart, if not by origin.
Although many Russian intellectuals espoused socialist beliefs before the revolution, most were shattered in their convictions after the Bolshevik seized power in October of 1917 and launched an attack on human rights. According to Zinaida Gippius, the intelligentsia was "solidly anti-Bolshevik at the time" and "the exceptions [to this rule] were very few."18 The non-Bolshevik press railed against the "putchists" and clamored for the restoration of democracy. Some intellectuals wrote letters to the Bolshevik authorities pleading with them to change their course and set free those arrested on trumped-up charges. Even some intellectuals close to Lenin and his circle were offended by his reckless conduct and disregard for ethics. Thus Maxim Gorky, a prominent writer who liked to boast his proletarian origins inveighed against the new regime. "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, personality, and the sum total of rights for which democracy fought for a long time."19 Instead of mobilizing the intelligentsia, the Bolsheviks waged war on it, depriving its members of their livelihood. "Something urgent 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 and that it was never more needed than today."20

Lenin's response to Gorky's plea, widely circulated in the nation, set the Party line with respect to the recalcitrant intellectuals. Lenin decried "pathetic intelligentsy, the lackeys of capitalism, who pride themselves on being the nation's brain. In fact, they are not the brain but shit."21 By the Spring of 1922, the Bolsheviks opened a frontal attack on their ex-allies, the Mensheviks, most of whom were imprisoned, deported to Russia's Far East, or expelled from the country. Soon after, the nation's leading philosophers were put on a ship and sent into exile in the West.22 The newspaper Pravda marked the occasion with an article published on August 31, 1922, bearing an ominous title, "The First Warning." Felix Dzerzhinsky, the feared head of the secret police, would write in one of his directives: "Information must be gathered by all departments and funnelled into
the department of intelligentsia. For every intelligent there must be a file. . . . Also, we must keep an eye on all literature in our jurisdiction." Nikolai Bulharin, the Party’s leading theoretician concurred: "We need the intelligentsia cadres that are ideologically trained in a certain way. Yes, we shall mold intelligently, we shall manufacture them as if on the assembly line." Soon enough, though, Bukharin discovered that his own views were not sufficiently orthodox by the increasingly militant standards of the time. He was arrested, charged with high treason, brutally interrogated, forced to confess implausible crimes, paraded before the whole world as a repentant criminal, and then executed. The fact that Lenin designated Bukharin as the Party’s brightest theoretical light did not help him in the eyes of Stalin, bent on rooting out opposition to his personal reign.

The common fixture in the Stalinist regime, show trials revealed the uglier side of the Party’s efforts to establish control over the affect of its members. The staged court proceedings demonstrated that self, face, emotions no longer belonged to the person but to the state. These were means for emotional production of social reality as objective and meaningful, and as such they had to be nationalized alongside the more mundane tools of material production. No one could claim ownership over one’s face in those days. It was too vital an instrument for augmenting the Party’s emotional capital to let it remain in private hands. The Party closely supervised the planting and harvesting of emotions in the land, which were nurtured by state controlled mass communications and micromanaged by the CPSU’s Central Committee’s Department of Agitation and Propaganda. Few people dared to discard the mask and reveal a nonconformist self underneath in Stalin’s time. Most surrendered their right to self-alienation voluntarily. After all, alienation was the scourge of the capitalist regimes and therefore had no economic basis in a socialist state. The notion of taking a stand and facing punishment for one’s daring was anathema to the regime. Hence, the all-out efforts to expunge old selves and replace them with new identities in those who came to the attention of the secret police. The failure to extract
confession from, and forge a new identity in, the accused was tantamount to the failure to do one's duty, and thus boded ill for the VCHK-NKVD-KGB prosecutors in charge of a criminal case.

The life of intellectuals loyal to the state was not much easier. Some, like Esenin and Mayakovsky, chose to commit suicide, unable to accept their comrades plight or fearing that their turn was next. Others like Kliuev, Pilniak, and Babel, died in Stalin's concentration camps. The intellectuals' most precious possession, their voice or golos, was taken away from them. Glasnost, the right to make one's voice heard, was for the faithful only, and even then, within the strict limits set by the Party. To lose the right to voice one's opinion also meant that one could not vote (the term golosovat or "to vote" in Russian shares the morpheme with glasnost). By far the ugliest aspect of this system was not the inability to make one's voice heard but the duty to voice views alien to one's heart, express feelings inimical to one's moral sentiments. Here is what Nadezhda Mandelstam had to say about the perverse glasnost of her time:

People gifted with a voice faced the worst possible torture: their tongue was ripped out and with the bloody stump they had to praise their master. The desire to live was irrepressible, and it coerced people into this form of self-annihilation, just to extend one's physiological existence. The survivors turned out to be as dead as those who actually died.25

Those who chose to collaborate with the authorities - and the majority had no choice but to do so, given the state's monopoly over employment - were obliged to lend their faces to the state. Even scholars working in natural sciences had to pay lip service to prevailing orthodoxies (witness the spectacle of Soviet biologists renouncing idealist genetics, physicists decrying bourgeois theory of relativity, and engineers railing against capitalist cybernetics). The political winds tended to shift suddenly, and so one had to be prepared to undergo a instantaneous change of heart, renouncing today what was the official wisdom yesterday.

"Is there anybody among us," wrote a person who lived through this era, "the most farsighted and incorruptible person imaginable,
who is not haunted by the memories of the compromises we were forced to make in the St. Petersburg’s captivity, who did not plead . . . for something or other or ate stale bread from the enemies palms? I know the taste of such bread, of this damn ration, as well as the feel of Soviet money in my hands. . . .”

Most intellectuals chose to compromise their conscience, not out of conviction (at least not during the first two decades of Soviet power) but out of necessity, in the hope to protect loved ones. "Theoretically, I know that one should not compromise, but how could I urge somebody to throw caution to the wind and not to compromise, to forget about your children. To all my friends I counsel – compromise," wrote Nadezhda Mandelstam. "There is one more thing I can add: do not bring children into this monstrous world.”

But the vast majority of those damned to live in Stalin’s empire could not bear the tortuous existence of a closet dissident. The victory of Bolsheviks appeared to be the historical necessity fully accepted by the masses. And so, one after another, Russian intellectuals changed their colors and endorsed the Bolshevik cause.

"Mandelstam," wrote his widow, "always tried to make up his mind freely and check his actions against reality, but even he was not an entirely free person: the noise of time, the noise of life conspired to suppress his inner voice: ‘How could I be right if everybody thinks otherwise’."

Boris Pasternak seemed to have reached a similar conclusion sometime in the early 30s. Mikhail Bulgakov sang praises to the Soviet regime, as did Anna Akhmatova, whose son languished in the Gulag. Mikhail Zoshchenko wrote children’s stories about Lenin, while Yuri Olesha glorified the Socialist state’s spectacular accomplishments. And here is what when Yuri Olesha had to say about his struggle to shed his old feelings and embrace new sentiments: "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. I wish to stifle that second ‘self,’ and the third self, and every ‘self’ which comes to haunt me from the past.”

Bear in mind that these were the nation’s most accomplished intellectuals and literary figures.
The gruesome reality of those years produced certain defence mechanisms that helped protect one's inner core and shield affect from shameless exploitation. One device was compartmentalization—the radical separation of one's public identity and private self. Those who embarked on this path reasoned that no one chose one's epoch, that the fate threw us into this world and we had to make do with its inanities. So, you would pay lip service to the communist values, do your emotion work in public, then retire to the small circle of trusted friends where you could tell jokes about the system, read books, brew fresh tea, and savor what little graces society left you to enjoy. Reading memoirs of those years, one could not help being amazed that people still fell in love, went on Summer vacations, wrote poetry. There was a price to be paid for the compartmentalization strategy, however; you had to avert your eyes when your neighbors' lives were shattered to pieces, your friends' children sent to prison schools, or your teachers humiliated and forced to repent for imaginary crimes. Violence inflicted on others took an exceedingly high toll on all those who witnessed it.

An alternative strategy was to maintain one's true self by doing what little one could to help the victims of purges and their families, making mental notes for posterity about the age of the Orwellian big brother, or letting the youngsters glean the proscribed truths. As one of my university teachers once explained to me, "Two times two is twelve by the lights of our time, but I managed to get across a message to my students that it is closer to nine or eight. A few inquisitive minds would learn that it is more like five or six, and thanks to me you know it is four." Keeping the flame and passing the torch to the next generation was a noble cause indeed, as long as you did not mind in the end, as some total of your life's achievements, to have furnished the proof that two times two was four.

Then, there was the life of active dissidence. Few would take this road during Stalin's reign. If someone dared to speak out, it is usually from the relative safety of exile, after one defected to the West. Even there nobody could be sure of one's future. Hundreds of emigres who
raised their voice against the criminal regime were murdered by Stalin's henchmen or abducted and returned to the Soviet Union. Leon Trotsky was murdered with an ice pick in Mexico, in 1940. Some brave souls refused to do public penance and preferred to die in the NKVD's torture chambers rather than to don official identities, but those were few and far between. Most succumbed to physical and emotional pressure and repented before facing death.

Perhaps the most common and, in some ways, most interesting strategy from our standpoint was the one that allowed a threatened person to use voluntary self-alienation as a means of bridging the gap between the public and the private. I am talking about the irony, sarcasm, and black humor which parodied official symbols that emerged as an important emotional resource in the narrow circles of the Soviet intelligentsia. Those using this strategy would not so much dare to reveal their deviant selves as try to poke fun at their own and others' public personas. I see it as a kind of socio-psychological hygiene designed to insure that the mask would not sink roots and turn into a face. An ironic person highlights the fact that a public persona, his own and that of others, is a fraud, that somewhere beneath there lurks a deviant self.

Nadezhda Mandelshtam spotted this strategy in the early 20's in her friend Ilya Erenburg who "looked on everything as if he were a stranger . . . and hid himself behind ironic omniscience. He already figured out that irony was the weapon of the helpless." A number of secretly written literary works from this era present marvelous examples of irony and satire, including Shklovsky's book "The Zoo," Mikhail Bulgakov novel "Master and Margarita," Mandelshtam's "The Forth Prose." Take, for instance, this parody of socialist realism written by Arkady Belinkov:

Even in our days, though extremely rarely and only in extraordinary situations sometimes arise minor contradictions between bad artists and wonderful society. To be sure, they are resolved expeditiously, but to ignore them altogether would be a touch premature. Those minor and instantly resolvable contradictions usually arise in connection with the slight incongruity between socialist realism and realistic socialism.
But it was not until Stalin's death that this form of "emotional deviance," to borrow an expression by Peggy Thoits, would become widespread in Soviet society.

Nikita Khrushchev, a man who led the campaign against Stalinist excesses, had his reasons to hate Stalin. He never forgot how "the greatest leader of all time" humiliated him by ordering this clumsy man to dance Ukrainian folk dances before his laughing comrades, though that was a trifle compared to what Stalin did to his flunkies. More to the point, the political purges that affected many of Khrushchev's friends were about to consume him as well. Whether Stalin was poisoned by his comrades who feared for their lives, as some researchers suspect, is debatable; there could be no doubt that toward the end of his life, Stalin was a menace to every sane person in the land.

Khrushchev's reforms aimed primarily at improving the plight of his party comrades unjustly purged in Stalin's campaigns, but they gave hope to millions of rank and file Soviet citizens. In particular, they encouraged intellectuals to shed the facade of unanimity they had grown accustomed to wear. "Society [that] shoved the flute down the artist's throat," began to experiment with glasnost, artistic freedom, and invited a measured critique of past excesses.

"It is amazing how I survived through those harrowing years," wrote Boris Pasternak soon after Stalin's death. "It is simply unbelievable what I allowed myself back then. But then my fate shaped me exactly the way I shaped my fate. I foresaw a lot and, what is most important, I could not accept a lot of things . . . I did not store enough patience [for the ordeal]. . . . My time is still far away." Pasternak was right: his time would come nearly thirty years after his death. Meanwhile, he had to face expulsion from the Soviet Writers' Union, renounce the Nobel Price awarded to him for his novel "Doctor Zhivago," endure heart attacks precipitated by his daring decision to make his lonely voice heard. Still, the portentous fact was that Pasternak found courage not only to write a novel defying the socialist realism's cannons but also to publish it abroad – something
that could not have happened without Khrushchev's Thaw. The vials of tears shed by those lucky enough to survive Stalin's regime nourished the new intellectual currents and helped reestablish the link between the old and the new intelligentsia.

In the area of emotion work and impression management, the most pertinent change brought by the liberalization was the fact that Soviet citizens were no longer required to sign their enthusiasm about the system. As long as you kept quiet and refrained from challenging the Party's reign, you could entertain deviant private feelings. Your lack of enthusiasm would not go unnoticed; it could give a closet nonconformist a hard time, especially in formal school settings, but dishing out hatred on the enemies of the state and displaying an ideologically inspired adulation would remain mandatory only for individuals bent on a public career. That meant, among other things, that emotional deviants could hang together, form small groups where dissident sentiments would be expressed more or less freely.

The Democratic movement that sprang out at the time owed much to this auspicious development. Its program centered on civil liberties, religious tolerance, and in the late 60s, on the freedom of emigration. The movement activists did a lot to expose the country's ills, its inhuman treatment of political, religious, and artistic nonconformists. But the movement's very success hastened its demise. As world public opinion was brought to bear on the system's inane mores, the Soviet government felt increasingly embarrassed. The orders went out to clamp down on dissent.

In 1963, Nikita Khrushchev was deposed; his successors tightened the screws on emotional deviants, reclaiming state control over the facework of its members. Three years later, the authorities reverted to the political show trials, charging Andrey Siniavsky and Yuli Daniel for the crime of publishing their works in the West without state approval. Open dissent in the U.S.S.R. practically disappeared by the late 70s. Some chose to withdraw from society once again, becoming internal emigres. Others went underground, continuing to
expose Soviet power abuses. Still others preferred to work through legal channels, vesting their hopes in education.

An important feature of this period was the split between those emotional deviants who favored clandestine activism and those who put much stock in education and changing the system from within. Alexander Solzhenitsyn called on his fellow citizens to "fortify oneself and refuse to budge, sacrificing one's life rather than the principle!" But his liberal colleagues, while deferential to his moral authority, found his strident demand "not to live by lie" impractical under the current conditions. "Aren't the absolute refusal to compromise and the unconditional determination to pursue truth and defend human rights always preferable to the willingness to play politics, make compromises, and show moral flexibility?," asked Efim Etkind. His answer was in the negative, for "moral maximalism" advocated by Solzhenitsyn could only help the authorities weed out sane characters in the country. "[T]he enlightenment must precede [political] renaissance, underground publications are not sufficient. . . . The first task is to teach, educate, enlighten. To participate in this centrally important – indeed the only relevant activity in our time, we should be ready to conceal thoughts, yield and manoeuver, of course, within the morally acceptable limits." 

Vladimir Lakshin was even more forceful in his denunciation of the tactics of open resistance. He pointed out that Solzhenitsyn's "indifference to means, the psychology of the preventive strike, cruelty and lying" reflected his prison camp experience, that "Solzhenitsyn also imbibed the poison of Stalinism." "[T]he author who addresses us with his passionate appeal for us to pursue truth, humanity, and goodness scorns to observe these commandments in his own dealings."

This conflict was never settled. Looking back, one realizes that all the choices available to Soviet intellectuals at the time were emotionally costly. The liberals had to support the government when it invaded Czechoslovakia. They had to look the other way when Andrey Sakharov, human rights activist, was sent into exile. They did
not dare to confront the government that sent its dissidents to psychiatric hospitals. All they could do, besides quietly passing the torch to the new generation, was to curse the Party in the relative privacy of their homes and invoke a "secret freedom" to keep their sanity intact. To be sure, they also could practice irony, which they did with great relish. "In the atmosphere of mendacity, all-consuming irony becomes a universal self-defense mechanism." But irony has always been a double-edged sword. It dramatizes the person's contempt for the system, debunks the official appearances, tears down the Potemkin-portable villages erected by enslaved facework, but it also corrodes the ironist from within, turning him into a cynic who denies the possibility of constructive engagement and heaps scorn on everyone who dares to disagree. Self-parody and sarcasm are the flip side of political impotence, powerlessness, and emotional alienation.

The few years that elapsed between the time Mikhail Gorbachev announced the new policy of glasnost and the day when Boris Yeltsin announced the dissolution of the Soviet Union are by far the happiest in the history of the Russian intelligentsia. Reasons for this near-euphoric state are not difficult to discern. For the first time, Russian intellectuals could shed the hated masks and express their true feelings without being accused of treason. While enjoying the right to say what they wished and to create what they saw fit, intellectuals continued to benefit from state subsidies. They were welcome guests on talk shows, frequent visitors to the West, and an increasingly powerful presence in government think-tanks and state committees. It seems like the intelligentsia enjoyed the best of two worlds—capitalism and socialism. It was a golden opportunity for the intelligentsia to increase its social capital. And that meant first and foremost reclaiming glasnost and asserting the right to dissent. A dissident, then, can be described a person who chooses his own identity, strenuously asserts the ownership over his face and the products of his emotion work. It is also someone willing to respect other people's selves and feelings, no matter how disagreeable those might be. "One of the conditions of honesty and directness that our time demands," charged Sergei Averintsev, a leading intellectual of
his generation, "is putting an end to the situation where we confuse the dissenter (nesoglasnyi) with the enemy. The intelligentsia must nurture in itself the culture of dissent (kultura nesoglasiiia), the culture of debate. I am talking not just about weak tolerance but true respect for the opponent." It was not sufficient for an intellectual to reclaim control over his facework. It was equally imperative to square off with the sullied identities that one had to manage in the past. It was time for Soviet intellectuals to settle some old accounts. The themes of repentance and spiritual renewal would come to play a prominent role in the intellectual discourse. One could look at this talk as a form of therapy that the nation had to undergo after decades of, to use Kemper’s apt description, "emotional footbinding."^43

"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 Tolstoy whose ideal of fighting evil with active conscience has such resonance today.44 Notice the reference to Tolstoy and conscience; neither was commonly used during the Soviet rule. The whole notion of morality, let alone religious values, was inimical to the Bolshevik’s creed. The new times called for cleansing the layers of filth that forced emotional labor left on peoples’ faces. Intellectuals led the way in the confessional literature that flooded the market in the late 80s. Many confessed old sins against truth, repented for their failure to speak out in defence of their colleagues. There was a lot of finger pointing, particularly by the 60’s style liberals who suffered repression under Brezhnev and his successors. But the accused did not yield ground readily. They argued that everyone who lived under the old regime had to compromise. Vladimir Soloukhin, a popular village prose writer, who denounced Boris Pasternak’s novel "Doctor Zhivago," pointed out that there were more than 500 Soviet writers present at that infamous meeting, yet nobody had guts enough to defend the author. He had a point – nobody who lived through the era was completely blameless; the best of Russian minds – Likhachev, Losev,
Averintsev – acknowledged that much. In fact, the more decent the person’s behavior was in the years past, the more likely he was to assume responsibility for not doing more to resist the regime. Soloukhin and his conservative colleagues were more than a bit disingenuous blaming troubled times for their behavior. For, even in those years, one had a choice to be evil’s "first apprentice," as Arkady Belinkov put it, and to be its unwilling victim.

Perestroika brought in its wake a heightened interest in the Russian intelligentsia of its illustrious pedigree. Some critics found the ills plaguing Soviet intellectuals already present in their predecessors. Others emphasized intelligentinost or emotional intelligence that marked its best representatives, such as Anton Chekhov, Mikhail Gershenzon, Vladimir Korolenko. As Dmitri Likhachev told an interviewer, "an unschooled peasant can be called an intelligent [Russian intellectual], but the same cannot be said about a ruffian, even if he is burdened with intellect, scientific degrees, and official honors... For ‘Russian intelligent’ designates a soulful, moral, rather than cerebral, category. Better put: unless movement of the heart precedes movement of thought, a person cannot be called an intelligent." As this passage suggests, intelligence is a moral agency, while intelligentsia is a social force whose mission is to ameliorate society not just through theoretical discourse but by personal example. "Jesus Christ," suggested one intellectual, "was in essence a prototype of the intelligent," a "born again" individual struggling to be righteous himself rather than teach others how to live. From which it follows that "to call oneself an intelligent is like giving oneself a medal." One could readily see why the intelligentsia felt euphoric in the heady days of perestroika. It was no exaggeration for Nathan Edelman to say that "There is no doubt that the intellectuals’ support for perestroika is virtually unanimous." But this euphoria did not last. What seemed like the fusion of capitalism and socialism at their best, would soon turn out to be the worst of the two possible worlds.
With the Soviet Union dismantled, Russian intellectuals discovered that their's was a fool's paradise. Long with the powerful state went the subsidies for their creative endeavors, opportunities for employment and highly visible appointments. Since the early 90s, Russian intellectuals found themselves in a precarious state, as the government started massive layoffs in the futile hope to balance the budget. The runaway inflation impoverished most intellectuals, whose salaries that used to be as high as ten times the national average would hover just above the poverty level. Some academic institutions and many research facilities were closed, forcing the best scholars to seek employment in the West and others to look for alternative income sources. The artistic unions could no longer assure film makers, actors, writers, painters, and musicians lucrative commissions or even steady employment. Many renowned performing companies fell on hard times, some went out of business because of the sagging demand for their products. Literary journals and newspapers that used to sell millions of copies of their publications saw their press runs cut back dramatically. Worse than that, intellectuals found themselves on the defensive: the populace turned against the intelligentsia, blaming it for the nation's sorry plight.

Old wounds reopened, as the intellectuals' soul searching grew bitter and self-destructive. "I detest being an intellectual," confides one prominent Russian writer. Another one tells the interviewer who called him an intelligent: "Please do not call me with this disgusting word. I never considered myself an intelligent and always viewed this term with contempt." If Lenin ever was right, adds Ivanov, it was in his assessment of the intelligentsia as the nation's excrement. Many other public figures, especially those with conservative and Slavophile leanings, concurred with this assessment. Before too long, the debate about the intelligentsia and its responsibility for the nation's misfortune turned ugly. The old habit of sarcasm and abuse resurfaced once again, as intellectuals showered each other with scorn. The current situation vividly reminds one of the emotional climate in Russia at the turn of the century, when Mikhail Gershenzon
observed: "Nine-tenths of our intelligentsia is afflicted with neurasthenia, there are almost no normal people among us -- everybody is acerbic, withdrawn, restless faces contorted in a grimace, either because one was crossed or because one was saddened. . . . We infect each other with bitterness and have so much saturated the atmosphere with our neurasthenic attitudes toward life that a fresh person, say, the one who lived for a while abroad, could not help feeling suffocated in our midst."51

To be sure, there are other voices as well, which cannot be drowned completely in this acrimonious exchange. The names of Sergei Averintsev, Dmitri Likhachev, Marietta Chudakova, Viktor Sheinis, Yuri Levada come to mind. These voices call for civility and emotional sanity. They remind us that democracy is more than a set of political institutions and practices but also a quality of experience, an emotional culture grounded in good faith and dialogue. Said John Dewey, democracy begins at home. When everyday life is emotionally polluted, where emotional abuse is the order of the day, democracy cannot help but suffer. 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 had gone through Stalinist purges, were intimidated by the KGB, witnessed ideologically inspired violence could not help being deeply troubled by their experiences. The Russian intelligentsia's frustrations go back for centuries and are fuelled by an intellectual culture whose participants had their feet to the fire until they agreed to say things repugnant to their conscience. Herein lies the hidden cesspool fouling Russia's intellectual life.

The perennial quest for inner freedom underscores the longing for basic rights -- to express oneself, to move freely, to choose one's fate -- the birthmark longing of a Russian intellectual. B. Kistiakovsky exposed the intelligentsia's tendency to juxtapose inner freedom and legal liberty nearly a century ago: "But inner freedom, immediate spiritual freedom, can be realized only under the conditions of external freedom -- the latter is the best school for the former."52 The
disregard for human rights and legal guarantees breeds moral maximalism, rabid intellectualism, and emotional violence. Common among Russian intellectuals, these qualities reflect an emotional culture disfigured by absolutism, a strangulated affect inevitable in a state that drags people into distorted communications against their will, forces them to say things they do not mean and cover up their insincerity by irony and sarcasm. No intellectual prowess makes up for deficient emotional intelligence; no concern for the well-being of humanity justifies callousness toward people around us; no inner freedom exonerates the individual from personal responsibility for his conduct; no ethical commitment absolves one from the need to respect law. When these common sense precepts are casually and routinely flouted, the human spirit is diminished, emotional overloading ensues, the entire community suffers. The collective howling we hear today in Russia proves this point. It bears more than a fleeting resemblance to the post-traumatic stress syndrome common among people who went through harrowing experiences but failed to come to grips with what they felt because their feelings were deemed to be worthless and politically incorrect.

There are many lessons about emotional culture that could be learned from this story. Perhaps the main one is that social structure, culture, and emotions belong to one continuum, that we can separate them only in abstraction and at the heavy cost of glossing over the human predicament. All societies need to mobilize affect to accomplish their goals. Some do this in a more ruthless way than others. When society defines certain feelings as incorrect and loads them with negative significance, it will reap a harvest of emotional discontent, especially when the feelings in question involve basic human needs of autonomy, creativity, self-expression, and compassion. When the gap between private sentiments and their public expression becomes too wide, we are bound to see a pattern of ironic detachment and emotional littering which help to mask the gap and to protect one’s inner core. The chronic conditions of voicelessness that mark Russian history are particularly conducive to this form of emotional behavior, which in its extreme form, could be
classified as emotional disturbance or pathology. Finally, we can conclude that democratic society can flourish only in a particular emotional climate, the climate that favors tolerance, civility, good faith, compassion, and humor. For as long as the emotional soil remains infertile, democratic institutions will not sink roots in Russia.
Notes


20. Ibid., p. 244.


37. Solzhenitsyn, Bodalsia telenok, p. 603.


39. Ibid., p. 249.

40. Lakshin, Ibid., p. 61.


45. Dmitry Likhachev, "Nelegkaia nosha akademika Likhacheva," Moskovskie Novosti (September 18, 1988). The words a partial paraphrase of Likhachev’s words by the interviewer, A. Chernov.


47. Natalia Ivanova, "Prezentatsiia apokalipsisa, ili kto ne uspel, tot opozdal," Literaturnaia Gazeta (September 8, 1993).


