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Introduction: Continuity and Change in Russian Culture

Dmitri Shalin

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

We divided the labor in such a way that each participant could center on one cultural domain -- religious, artistic, intellectual, political, economic, etc. The borders demarcating each domain under study are not meant to be sharp. The map of Russian culture we have drawn is admittedly arbitrary. But we believe that our survey is comprehensive enough to give the reader some insight into Russian culture, the key junctures in its historical development, and the momentous transformations it has been undergoing in recent years.

Our project is interdisciplinary. It pulls together the resources of the humanities and social sciences, which increases the chance for cross-fertilization in the fields whose practitioners often lose sight of what is going on in neighboring disciplines. Our team includes literary and cinema critics, historians, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, and political scientists. The participants rely on a wide range of methods, including personal interviews, analysis of Soviet literature, cinema, and fine arts, as well as opinion surveys. We proceed on the assumption that humanists and social scientists have a lot to learn from each other, that sociological surveys illuminate relationships crying for fresh interpretations and humanistic insights open new vistas inviting further sociological probing.

Scholars working on this project met in Las Vegas on November 19-20, 1992, for the Nevada Conference on Soviet Culture. The occasion afforded the intellectuals raised in vastly different cultures an opportunity to reflect on their biases, enrich each other's perspective, and set up a framework for future collaboration. We plan to follow up this study with three more conferences and volumes that would explore in depth artistic, political, and economic realms in Russian culture. Meanwhile, we offer the papers

presented at the conference to our colleagues, students, and the general public interested in Russia and its uncertain future.

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

* * * *

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

In its extreme form, cultural determinism encourages one to string vastly diverse social facts on a single conceptual cord and to look for a cultural continuity impervious to historical change. Thus, Nikolai Berdiaev [2] discerns in Russian history "spiritual ailments that could not be cured by any external social reforms and revolutions," personality traits that "belong to the metaphysical character of the Russian people and manifest themselves in the Russian revolution." The grotesque characters that Nikolai Gogol pictured in his famous stories, Berdiaev is convinced, "are not phenomena generated by the old regime, by certain social and political causes; quite to the contrary -- [these characters] have informed the regime's political and social forms, determined all that was bad in this regime."

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

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

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

Lets not forget, however, that some Russian thinkers have spurned sweeping generalizations about their country's cultural patterns. As Dostoyevsky put it, "all our slavophilism and westernism is but one great confusion, albeit a necessary one." [6] "Should we blame our national character?," queried Dobroliubov. "This invocation hardly resolves the

issue, it only pushes it further back: How did our national character, passive and weak as it is, evolve? We are simply forced to move the deliberation from the present onto a historical plane." [7]

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

We share our starting premise with those students of Soviet society who believe that a "genuine understanding of events in the Soviet Union must incorporate both density of detail and a historical perspective." [8] Our volume opens up with chapters focusing on the historical forces that shaped Soviet culture, the evolution of beliefs, values, and action patterns in key cultural spheres, and the internal contradictions peculiar to each cultural area. Then, the authors move to the transformation that various cultural spheres underwent during the perestroika years and beyond. In each of these domains we have witnessed a far-reaching reconstruction punctuated by the conflict between the taken-for-granted values and the new, often confusing, precepts brought forth by reform. We proceed on the assumption that reforming society is impossible without reforming its members' consciousness, that macro-institutional changes must be translated into the ways people think, feel, and act, if these changes are to endure. Our emphasis, therefore, is on the beliefs, attitudes, and values behind new ways of doing things, on the changes in personal and group orientations insofar as these are reflected in mass consciousness and expert-elite cultures and find their expression in opinion polls, the popular press, literary magazines, and personal conversations.

In theoretical terms, we take our inspiration from an interpretive tradition that gives the human spirit a center place in scholarly narrative. [9] Our outlook on culture owes much to Max Weber who, in Clifford Geertz's graphic words, taught us that "man is the animal suspended in the webs of significance he himself has spun." [10] This precept calls for special attention to the sense people make of their own life situation, their professed beliefs, values, and meaningful actions. We view humans as self-conscious beings, "as characters in enacted narratives," [11] or individuals bent on choosing their own narrative system and narrating their own lives. Time and place may severely constrain individual choice, but structural constraints can not extinguish the quest for a more viable

system of values and a better life style.

Although human understandings form a system, the latter is never devoid of inconsistencies and contradictions. In cultural domains, "pluralism is common, inconsistency is pervasive and syncretism is general practice." [12] For students of Soviet culture, this insight is signally important, for it highlights conflicts endemic to the system of values supported by official Soviet culture. In decades before perestroika, these conflicts were submerged. As time went by, they grew more visible, the gap between official values and everyday reality became more tangible, and a double life -- one for official consumption and one for the inner circle of trusted friends -- increasingly intolerable. We fully appreciate what Gellner [13] calls "the social role of absurdity." In the years immediately preceding Gorbachev's reforms, this absurdity manifested itself in pervasive disenchantment, ironic detachment, mockery of official cultural norms, and other nonconformist gestures that exposed official hypocrisy and hinted at an autonomous agent behind the official role, an irrepressible private self ready to burst out and subvert the official grand narrative. [14]

We take issue with those who believe that there is "no 'usable past' in Russian thought," [15] who are inclined to view the Soviet era as Russian culture's Dark Ages. A similar attitude prevailed among Enlightenment philosophers who passed the harsh judgment on the European Middle Ages as a period hopelessly marred by human waste and spiritual stagnation. The romantic successors to the Enlightenment cast a more ambivalent glance at the period, which was colored in part by the growing awareness that capitalism and modernity brought in their wake deprivations and horrors all their own. To pass judgment on Soviet civilization means not only to stigmatize its many failures but also to bring to the fore its hidden graces.

We need to understand why so many talented painters, writers, and poets placed their names on the revolutionary masthead; how Block, Malevich, Mayakovsky, Eisenstein, and scores of other artists managed to produce lasting works of art; what is there in the totalitarian environment that nourishes friendship and creativity; which are this era's undeniable, even if perverted, gains that have to be surrendered in a freer, democratic, market oriented society of the future. Yes, Soviet art helped prop up the Bolshevik regime, but it also engendered works that through their very aesthetic qualities undermined the legitimacy of Soviet power. Why else would Soviet artists face such relentless persecution from the authorities? After all, Soviet society produced not only Zhdanov , Makarenko, Lysenko,

Kozhevnikov, Markov but also Losev, Shostakovich, Sukhomlinsky, Sakharov, Liubimov, Avertinsev and many other cultural figures whose personal courage and creative accomplishments cannot be denied. Whatever lofty aspirations and momentous transcendences found in Soviet society deserve to be salvaged for our memories.

We also want to stress that the recent reforms in Russia by no means embody a uniform progress. Perestroika did not free cultural life in the Soviet Union from contradiction. "Societies do not necessarily move from one type or stage to another in an 'upward ever, backward never fashion'." [16] Far from that, Soviet reforms have set in motion fresh conflicts and bred new ironies. "Paradoxically," writes Eklof, [17] "glasnost may be vital to perestroika; but it may also be its undoing." The same goes for many hard fought freedoms in Russia . A Soviet artist may be free today to follow his creative instincts, but he is also relieved from the state subsidies that used to support his art. A Soviet entrepreneur can now set up his own business, but he has to deal with ambiguous laws, face hostile customers, and ruthless racketeers. A dissident, accustomed to the role of an outside critic, now finds himself in a position of authority where he has to deliver on earlier promises. Contradictions and ironies is the stuff of which social change is made, and we have tried to give them full treatment in our study.

Nor should our premises be taken to mean that culture exists in a vacuum, that it informs without being informed. All cultures are embedded in historical contexts and are constrained by social, economic, and political structures which inhibit or facilitate social change. The point is rather that cultural rhetoric matters, that each culture has a logic of its own, that any attempt to manipulate values and subject culture to a legislative dictate are bound to misfire, as many revolutionary regimes have discovered. The line separating substance and style, rhetoric and reality, attitudes and behavior, meaning and structure is never too sharp in matters of cultural politics. Style is not some sort of wrapping that could be readily replaced, nor is substance akin to wine that could be poured into a new container with its properties intact. There is no such thing as styleless substance any more than there is substanceless style. When people forgo old rhetoric and switch to a new cultural narrative, they undermine the status quo and weaken established structures. Gorbachev has learned it the hard way when his rhetoric of glasnost went far beyond his original plan to update the cumbersome Soviet system. The same goes for Solzhenitsyn: once he declared that "ugly methods multiply in ugly results," [18] he had little choice but to disavow Zhirinovskiy and ultra-nationalists whose venomous rhetoric and hatred toward "alien elements" are sabotaging

serious efforts at social reconstruction in Russia.

Our focus on discursive forms does not conflate cultural narrative with social life in its totality, it does not cast verbal culture as a primary causative factor in social evolution; rather, it reflects our contention that public discourse, in both its high and popular culture forms, feeds into reality just as it takes into itself and continuously articulates the ongoing social transformation.

In sum, we view culture as action steeped in narrative, drenched in emotions, informed by common needs, grounded in institutional discourse that serves to legitimize our public conduct and justify our action to ourselves and to others. [19] From which it follows that attitudes and conduct belong to one continuum, that values are to be understood as verbal behavior, action at a slice, while conduct is to be seen as stand-taking, a succession of attitudes displayed for the purpose of legitimizing oneself to others and to one's own selves. Correlatively, national character transpires here not as a psychological structure formed at some early point in a nation's history and determining immutable personality traits but a semiotic or narrative structure comprised by roles, scenarios, behavioral strategies, and emotional attitudes which could be invoked or deployed on a particular occasion to legitimize the chosen course of action but which do not preclude the situational and historical transcendence of the established cultural forms. Far from being a set of hidden values, sacred texts, socialization practices, and behavioral patterns enciphered in a code that foreordains the historical process, culture is a multitextual, polivocal, inherently contradictory affair that leaves ample room for choice and creativity, personal commitment and responsibility. Throughout this volume, we have tried to demonstrate that there is a choice to be made and responsibility to be claimed by those who have to grapple with Russian culture at this critical historical juncture. Russian culture is at the crossroads; its future depends in large measure on the choices that its agents will make in years to come. To be sure, the cataclysmic break with the past we have witnessed in Russia in the last decade cannot be directed and controlled from above. It produces unanticipated consequences, stirs conflicts, and breeds deviant conduct -- a pattern well-known to students of social change. Underlying this pattern is what Durkheim [20] called "anomie" -- the situation where old norms no longer apply but new ones are too vague and problematic to command universal assent. As numerous accounts attest, [21] behavioral changes in revolutionary times are accompanied by a cognitive restructuring that sets new standards of valuation and breeds the feeling of moral malaise. What people in Russia are discovering is that the system is encrypted in their

selves, that it cannot be turned on and off at will. Bred into people's bones for seventy-odd years, Soviet culture is bound to persist for some time after the coercive structures supporting it have crumbled. It would be naive to believe that our efforts to illuminate Russian culture could have any discernable impact on its course. But to the extent that our study facilitates the Russian people's efforts to come to grips with its past traumatic experiences, it might make cultural change in Russia less painful for those who have to live it through.

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

* * * *

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