Restructuring of the USSR in Russia: 
the Role of Intelligentsia

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1. It is well known that possibly the single most decisive factor of Gorbachev’s perestroika success was his relying on the intelligentsia. The very first step was glasnost and the ever farther-reaching freedom of the press. This was more than enough to gain broad support of all those who wielded the written and the spoken word, all those who were yearning for freedom that was flooding the vacuum of mass media. It was precisely the word of the intelligentsia that stood in the way of party bureaucracy plotting to get rid of Gorbachev in the very first year or two. Mass media was not the field where the nomenklatura was able to compete with the intelligentsia. Thanks to that, Gorbachev won time – and following that - the perestroika. The gains exceeded his expectations, but he was not able to use the profits wisely. But this is an altogether different matter.

2. The intelligentsia that entered the era of perestroika was thoroughly soviet in its essence, all distinctions notwithstanding, in other words, the intelligentsia operated on the premise of Soviet power being eternally everlasting. One might say that here that there was no argument between the intelligentsia and Soviet ideology. (Getting ahead of ourselves, we can say that this explains how the metaphor of the “thaw” turned out to be both important and wrong for the assessment of perestroika.)

The concept of the eternal nature of Soviet power could be seen in the public discourse of the time. In the early texts addressed to audiences outside of the Soviet Union, to the domestic samizdat reader, and to the high echelons
of power, the necessary mimicry was intertwined with the convictions of the author, unbeknownst to him or to his reader. Sakharov’s Reflections... is one of the earliest and most vivid examples: “The vitality has been proven of the socialist path that brought to the people enormous material, cultural, and social achievements, that has like no other boosted the moral meaning of work.”

These texts were addressed to power – in the hope of improving it. These hopes were justified by the arrival of Gorbachev. But they also slowed down the realization that there is no room for reform in this power.

3. In the era of the Thaw that shaped the generation of the 1960’s, who then became the mainstay of the leader of Perestroika, the role of the literati, commentators, scholars, and technical intelligentsia turned out, as we all know, to be very sizable. This period, in contrast to the time just preceding Stalin’s death, is remarkably complex for the comprehension of Western observers and the new generations of today.

It is hard to study this period immediately following the 20th Party Congress, exactly because Soviet power, unable to offer anything tangible, while intuitively understanding what had to be avoided, was making many reverse steps and actions. These steps, however illogical, served the purpose of its self-preservation. The Thaw planted the seeds of that new hypocrisy whose fruit poisoned the next fifty years of life in the country (and, having been unexpectedly easily resuscitated, today continues to poison it). This hypocrisy officially proclaimed what could not be reconciled by common sense: “There are still some communists that fail, or do not wish, to understand that the cult of personality cannot be interpreted as a phenomenon inherent in the nature of Soviet society, that mistakes and flaws it has caused have not, and could not, have changed the socialist nature of Soviet power, our general party line, or its staunch faithfulness to the Marxist-
Leninist principles.” (Central Committee circular letter to party organizations following the 20th Party Congress; July 16 1956, Top Secret)

The coming of Gorbachev rejuvenated hope. Many felt the breath of a second Thaw. And this is where the trap of history awaited them – grabbing at the fallacious analogy, sated by it, they failed to feel the wind of a new period of history. The phenomenon of the Thaw was all the time slowly getting frozen by the authorities (how appropriate the definition proved to be!), and it influenced mightily the perception of the processes to follow.

For one, it has prevented the clear sight of Perestroika as a precursor and a beginning of a new era. It was seen for the entire time as yet another Thaw – or a crack in the window temporarily left ajar.

A December 31, 1986 entry in the diary of Alexander Chudakov points to the fabric that connects us to the past: “Recent events breathe hopes into us for the first time since 1967. An entire generation has grown up in the stagnant Brezhnev times and matured with no hopes at all. And we, too....Is it possible that – to use Pushkin’s “sad decline” – will there again be the 1960s?”

“Recent events” stands for the return of Andrei Sakharov from internal exile in Gorky. It was this particular event that became for me and Alexander Chudakov, as well as for many, but not all, a pivotal one in the evaluation of the developments as a beginning of a new era.

For many members of the intelligentsia who played not an insignificant role in the years of the Thaw, now everything synched – the demand of “More socialism!”; Gorbachev’s confiding confession that he read Lenin every day and will never renege on his grandfather’s choice in favor of the kolkhoz; and most importantly, the realization of their natural and long-time desire to “labor hand-in-hand with the people and in accord with higher law” (Pasternak). “Laborers of Perestroika”, the new title of the people of the 1960s, would say they are part of Gorbachev’s team.
It seemed that at any moment, all that Khrushchev failed to bring to completion would now be complete and socialism would gain a human face.

After Gorbachev they were unable to break out of the ideological limits they set for themselves and stood to oppose Yeltsin. In my view, this opposition proved destructive for the country, as some opposed Yeltsin because he has gone too far, others because he did not dare go far enough.

4. There was one more generation of intelligentsia that reached maturity in the 1970’s. It had its own classification.

By the aphorism of the early 1970’s, following the crushing of the Prague Spring, there are three qualities not to be found together in one person: intelligence, integrity, and membership in the party.

By that time there was no exclusion from this rule, no one who joined the party ranks who would not comply with this definition. Not one thinking person would any longer join the party with a naïve hope of reforming it from within, as in the times of the Thaw. It would only be out of opportunism or, at times, out of a benign desire to contribute something useful and important. The same desire today moves a few decent young men in the provincial cities to join the United Russia party – “Otherwise they won’t let you do anything,” is how they explain their actions.

As to the generation of the 1960’s, at this moment in time it was being expelled from the party – Bulat Okudzhava, a WWII veteran, Len Karpinski, Alexander Nekrich, to name but a few.

The Thaw was long gone, but cultural inertia persisted. Once in a while, up to the early 1980’s, you might come across an act of resistance on some particular matter that had the contours of the generation of the 1960’s looming behind it.

The intelligentsia of the 1970’s also included those for whom any cooperation with power was out of the question. There was a fairly broad
underground group who chose to work in boiler rooms and to guard elevators. During Perestroika their advanced degrees in humanities were suddenly in demand, and they appeared from the shadows contemplating publishing Vassili Rozanov...

At this very time, another part of the recent outsiders was getting ready to conquer the humanities departments of American universities – which, let us add, it deservedly did conquer. One of them demanded of me:

--- Tell me Marietta, aren't you scared when pages of The New World flood the heads of two million subscribers with the works of Sergei Bulgakov?

Another one picked up the line without his usual irony but somber gloom: “And nobody knows what kind of action a person stuffed with Sergei Bulgakov's writing might be capable of!”

Such was the aloof opinion of a refined and learned intellectual regarding his mass-like fellow citizens with whom he was supposed to build a civil society in a space that was fairly well cleared of Soviet debris and trash.

5. In 1987-1990 an incredible amount of work was done to acquaint the multi-million reading audience with the history of the Gulag and with the true role of Stalin in 20th century Russian history. (Let us not forget the curtain of silence that covered this history in the Brezhnev years, and that the generation of Putin was brought up not on the “One Day of Ivan Denisovich”, but on Kozhevnikov’s “By Shield and Sword” glorification of the KGB, and that the film based on the latter inspired the ninth grader Vladimir to offer himself to the KGB.)

It is difficult to overestimate the role of the intelligentsia in the quality and scope of the work to overcome this curtain of silence. However, in some ten years it has turned out that the work has not been sufficient. Today,
the country happily accepts the Stalin anthem as the anthem of Russia, and fifty or more percent of Russian citizens define Stalin as a positive figure of 20th century.

6. Why did it really happen?
It is quite possible that the Soviet intelligentsia was weakened as a result of having been severed from the bloodline of its own past, from its own strong philosophical tradition, as well as from the Western one. This deprivation affected its performance up to the middle of the Yeltsin era. All Perestroika philosophizing on the history themes was marked by the lack of an intellectual foundation of sufficient depth.

People's yearning for this depth of thought was effectively abused by followers of Eurasianism, of quasi-Masonic teachings, and other kinds of imitators whose publications have been flooding the Russian book markets for ten years.

7. Can we blame the intelligentsia for the resuscitation of Stalin, as well as for the whole Soviet epoch in today's Russia? To a considerable degree – yes.

The interest and attention of a scientist or a scholar to a paper by another scientist or scholar is preconditioned by the professional rating of the paper's author. Trust is a foundation of the relationship between authors and the public, between those who write and those who read. In the 1990's this trust was seriously damaged. Why? Because in the sharp change of tone and positions tangible in the press before and after 1985, one could sense only words coming out of a mouth, with no conviction, intellectual or spiritual effort, or personal drama behind it.

Trust is not something ephemeral; neither it is abstract. It is a very concrete and real thing. Trust is one of the important political and economic
notions; it is what makes social bonding possible. Trust in one bank, but not another; trust in this publishing house, but not another, because the first one is known for its reliability and integrity; it won’t publish books below its standards. Trust for a particular statesman or government is of the same nature.

It is hard to trust an author if you doubt the authenticity of his personal or spiritual experience. A person who has not examined his own life in an unforgiving manner can hardly offer an option for development for a whole country. It is not just moral incompetence (lecturing in morals is not my intention), but most likely it is intellectual incompetence. A conscientious self-reflection would have brought the intelligentsia closer to creating a civic ideology. This is the social duty of the intelligentsia. Such reflection, contrary to common wisdom, would not disable the intelligentsia’s will to action; on the contrary, it would raise its self-confidence and empower it. (The intelligentsia’s extremely low self-esteem can be explained by the fact that it has been victimized by its own complexes.)

The intelligentsia of the 1970’s and the 1980’s emerged in a strange shape before its multi-million readers, as if they were all born in 1985. Their updated biographies began in Gorbachev’s years. But whatever they were doing during their Party and Komsomol positions (a lot of that was, in fact, good) – all has “been wiped off, erased”, as a lazy student erases his poor grades from the class roster. These are the origins of a derogatory and offensive label, “turn-overs”.

Nobody paid attention to this during the years when social enthusiasm was at its peak. But in 1991-1992 people did start paying attention when the inevitable reforms began to be put into action, reforms which were tragically delayed by Gorbachev and which were, in many aspects, necessarily painful due to this delay. Hiding some data from their life histories and the stories of their intellectual and spiritual coming-of-age played a very sad role, having
undermined the trust of the majority of the population in a large and vital group in the life of our society.

Up to the present, this distrust would grow and be reinforced.

8. What has not been subjected to intellectual scrutiny and reassessment does not turn into experience and remains just something that happened to have taken place. Terrifying facts of Russian history of the 20th century were piling up on the pages of books published in the later 1980's and early 1990's. But the life experience of many people comprising the Party's ranks was disappearing even though for many, Party membership was ambivalent from the very start. After the mid 1960's, it was an ambivalent act for the majority who entered the Party. (Of course, I am talking about people for whom thinking and becoming aware of their actions is an ordinary exercise). Since the end of the 1980's, up to August of 1991, they were relieved to put down their Party membership cards and tried to forget about them as fast as they could – in a house of someone who committed suicide, do not mention the rope. But this silence only made our social climate more ambiguous and murky.

9. In the eyes of the public of the 1990's, the weight of one's biography was something that deflated the value of the intelligentsia. Their complete biographies – including those of their parents who died in the abyss of the Terror and turned out to be “good” and “honest Communists” after the 20th Party Congress, that gave their children a chance to accomplish something under the Soviet regime for some time, and when they would loose their jobs they could remain in the Central Committee's nomenclatura system – all this now spoke against them. Because it was considered as hypocrisy and double-dealing: “Why are you blaming and cursing the Party now – you used to hold all these Party nomenclature posts!” And they never spoke out; they never
articulated the fact that their complex intellectual development had its own significance and value (that was brilliantly done by Andrei Sakharov).

10. But what about the professional human rights advocates? What about dissidents? What were their roles and their place in the social developments of that time?

Here confusion prevailed: “Why are they not coming back?” It was well known from history and the present experience of Central European countries that political emigrants usually return to their reviving countries. It did not happen to us and it brought very unfortunate results. Moreover, many brilliant people were leaving the country in the course of the Perestroika. And then the claim “They never wanted freedom; they wanted freedom to leave the country!” began to sound louder. And so the country’s politically immature population, burdened by extreme economic hardship, was not able to grasp Sakharov’s idea of freedom of movement, which included the freedom to exit one’s country, as one of the basic conditions for democracy.

11. In 1919 Mikhail Bulgakov closed his first publication in the press with these words: “We, who belong to an unfortunate generation, dying as pitiful bankrupts, should tell our children: ‘Pay, pay fair price and always remember social revolution!’” He truly believed that they would have to pay even if his White Army won the Civil War. But the White Army lost, and “fair price” has risen sharply, And it took scores of years for the Russian public – from 1956 to the 1990’s – to realize what exactly we have been paying for. Such slow thinking caused a new confusion. It turned out that the necessary understanding of the origins of what happened, the significance of February and October of 1917, clouded the minds and over-shadowed specific characteristics of the Stalin period, which was a classic totalitarian 30 years’ period. To put it succinctly, they finally figured out Lenin’s role and fell in
love with Stalin anew. That’s how it goes – tails up, heads down; heads up, tails down. There are some, not just a few, who venerate both since “are your new ones any better?”

Our electorate, formerly “the people,” in Soviet times, i.e. for scores of years, believed the written word – first of all in papers and also in books.

In the Post-Soviet time a two-stage metamorphosis took place. First, the Soviet man was perplexed when he found out that Soviet papers had been lying to him, and in his state of shock he trusted the “new” papers adage that the “old” ones were lying. Then, step by step, he stopped believing the “new” papers, as well, because he became disillusioned, as we tried to demonstrate earlier in “the laborers of Perestroika”. Now, he thinks that it was precisely the new papers which lied about the Soviet times, which were good indeed.

12. The intelligentsia remained important in rejuvenating Russia for some time. At least the intelligentsia is familiar with such concepts as honor, social reputation, love for the country as the love for the free country. Yes, the idea that social reputation is what we need now, that one must have integrity, not to take bribes and keep one’s reputation untarnished, was part of that concept, that today can only make too many people in Russia laugh.

The disappearance of such concepts and values from the social fabric affected the intelligentsia negatively. Adding to that, the most authoritative public speakers inconsiderately and untimely began to stress the prevalence of private life over public life and civic impulses. In the old Soviet times, a civic impulse, among other factors, would make a man save a tractor, putting his own life at risk. We remember that people were officially encouraged to do such things. A famous Soviet slogan calls to put “the social above the private". But in the Post-Soviet times, any selflessness and high-mindedness was questioned. Such a total exchange of moral values supported by quite liberal public speakers was, I believe, a grave mistake.
Of course, it was crucial to emphasize the value of private life and generally, the value of every human life, which still has no value in our country, and to insist that human life is not something that is automatically to be given to the state for free, that it makes no sense to be ready to save a tractor by risking your life. But without selflessness, without caring for our society, without the idea of patriotism, very little good can be done. President Kennedy’s words engraved on the public gardens’ masonry are very close to my heart. I believe that today – in the most recent times – all these ideas and values necessary for the full development of the nation are slowly and quietly being revived in Russia.

Translated by Tatiana Yankelevich and Lydia Voronina