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The Bitter Taste of Success: Reflections on the Intelligentsia in Post-Soviet Russia

BY LIAH GREENFELD

When the society is sick, the cream of the
crop becomes its scum. *Literaturnaya Gazeta*,
4, 17, 1996

SPRING 1996 may not be the optimal time to assess the gains and losses of the transition to democracy in Russia. Posed in these terms, the question reflects a problematic assumption, which may be proven decisively wrong within a month but would need a period of several decades to be substantiated. Whatever the outcome of the on-coming elections, it is not at all certain that the dissolution of the communist order in 1990–1991 indeed resulted in a transition to democracy (we would not know that for sure until democracy is, in fact, established and proved viable). The election of the front-runner, Zyuganov, in contrast, will eliminate every doubt that the eventful five years on which we are now invited to comment were no “transition” at all but simply a disorderly intermission between one communist regime and another.

We do not at present and, unless our hopes for a democratic Russia are to suffer a crushing disappointment this summer, will not for a long time have the possibility to evaluate the

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objective significance of the process unfolding in front of our eyes. At the same time, it is clear that the participants in this process have shared the problematic assumption of the outside observers and did interpret it as “democratization.” This interpretation, as is the way with our convictions in general, has become a part of reality and an important factor influencing the process, not, unfortunately, in the sense of speeding it up and bringing democracy any closer, but in the sense that it colors the participants’ reactions to events and orients their actions. (Paradoxically, it makes democracy rather more unlikely).

Insofar as the phrase “gains and losses” presupposes intentional action, our analysis must indeed focus on participants rather than on unsuspecting victims or pleasantly-surprised beneficiaries of the transformation we have witnessed. In this respect, the Russian case may lend itself to discussion in terms of the suggested question more easily than some other East European cases, thus compensating for the indeterminate (at best) nature of the process itself. Only one social group in Russia, the intelligentsia, can be defined collectively as participants. Of all the strata in the Soviet society, the intelligentsia alone had been explicitly and more or less consistently interested in the change of the communist regime and offered opposition, however timid, to the old order. The opposition of the intelligentsia, moreover, was opposition in the name of Western values of democracy (and, by association, capitalism): it was the only stratum within which these concepts had any significance. As a result, the intelligentsia, *en masse*, welcomed and lined up behind Gorbachev’s *perestroika*. It was the only group that could identify with the cause of reform, even if, in accordance with the Russian tradition, decreed from above. The reform was transformed into a wholesale revolution, speeding up the disintegration of the old order, on the wave of the intelligentsia’s enthusiasm; and when the die-hard but incompetent old guard feebly reacted, it was the intelligentsia who

turned up in large numbers to defend this revolution at the risk of their lives, as many of them sincerely believed, during the memorable days of August 1991.

Though initiated by an autocrat brought up within the bureaucracy and with the interests of the bureaucracy at heart, the political transformation of the last decade was redefined early on in terms of the ideals and goals proposed by the intelligentsia and considered by the intelligentsia to be its own. As such, the transformation in fact became the project of the intelligentsia, remaining so perhaps through 1992 (not entirely unlike the revolutionary movement of the previous century, which, initiated by another autocrat—Alexander I—was the project of the intelligentsia up to perhaps the years of war communism). After 1992, the intelligentsia by and large abandoned the cause of reform, turning away from the ideals of democracy as uniformly as it had earlier rallied to them.

This collective change of heart followed a more or less explicit reckoning of the intelligentsia's gains and losses in the years of *perestroika* and reflected the realization that the losses outnumbered the gains. The intelligentsia being what it is, singularly preoccupied with the self, whether collective or individual, and skilled in self-analysis of a certain sort, and the new regime of *glasnost* inviting public articulation of the results of one's self-explorations, this reckoning, in large part, took place on the pages of various periodicals. One could find its traces in a wide range of journals, from daily newspapers with mass circulation, such as *Izvestia*, to more exclusive but highly visible "fat journals" with established reputations, such as *Novy Mir* or *Znamia*, to numerous new, briefly popular publications, such as *Stolitsa*, and various professional magazines, such as *Voprosy Filosofii*, *Istorii*, or *Literatury*. This public display of the intelligentsia's emotional turmoil ensured that the momentous and puzzling shift of attitudes within it would be fairly well documented, allowing an observer some insight into the reasons for this shift and offering a readily accessible, natural data base for the analysis of the sort intended by the present

volume. By drawing on this data base, this paper is an attempt to piece together a quilt of the intelligentsia's perceptions of the recent revolution and the actors' own assessments of the gains and losses which it implied for them.¹

The renunciation of seventy-year-old ideological commitments and the dissolution of the geo-political framework of identity itself could be expected to result in a crisis of consciousness. Such a crisis occurred only among the intelligentsia. The rest of the population were too preoccupied with the serious business of daily existence (in Russia both time-consuming and labor-intensive) to spare energy for reflection and, it appears, hardly noticed that the society was seized in the grip of anomie. (Material hardship, claimed Durkheim, is the best defense against the oppression of normative confusion.) This raises questions regarding the significance of communism and the Soviet Union for the majority of the Russian people and serves as yet more proof of the disproportionate weight of the intelligentsia in the Russian society. As a socially constructed reality (with all its depressing political and economic implications), this society simply could not exist without the active cooperation of this numerically negligible group, even if the latter cannot be held solely responsible for its construction.

The crisis of identity among the intelligentsia took the form of innumerable reassessments, at first excited, later despondent, of its nature and social role, which necessarily reflected the perception of its prospects in the new situation and, consequently, the evaluation of the situation itself. Both the questions raised and the answers proposed in these reassessments were in many respects similar, in fact, almost identical to the ones discussed during the previous "times of trouble": specifically, after the revolution of 1905 (the "Vekhi" controversy) but also, to the limited extent allowed for a while in the infant Soviet state, after 1917. Indeed, "Vekhi," the *landmark* volume that inaugurated the debates after 1905, as well as numerous contemporary responses to it came out in

new editions (most of them for the first time after the original publication). It became customary, even normative, to refer back to the participants in these century-old controversies to substantiate a point of view in the new one, and the terms and the very issues of 1900–1920 were incorporated and revived in the on-going discussion.² This “archeological” approach reflected the unbroken continuity in the social consciousness of the intelligentsia before and after communism and the Soviet Union and the fundamentally unchanged nature of their group interests.

The evaluation of the current situation, as before, depended first on the perceived scope for the political activity of the intelligentsia. *Glasnost*’ was initially interpreted as the recognition of its authority, and *perestroika*, or the democratic “reconstruction” of the society, was welcomed specifically as a reorganization of the relations between the intelligentsia and the bureaucracy on the basis of parity, or an invitation to the intelligentsia to take its rightful place at the helm of the ship of state. To take this place has been the traditional aspiration of the intelligentsia, which its representatives today clearly recognize. In their eyes, one of the major faults of the communist regime was that it systematically frustrated this aspiration. The Soviet state did not recognize in the intelligentsia the nation’s “teachers and providers,” as an author of an essay on Mayakovsky put it in the summer of 1993, “persistently, systematically rejecting its best, most talented children, those whom . . . the nation itself needed most” (Chegodayeva, 1993, p. 4). This attitude drove Mayakovsky to suicide, but the intelligentsia repaid the state with disaffection and withdrawal of support. The experience of the Soviet state made Gorbachev’s reforms and “democratization” an object of great expectations, but the intelligentsia’s support was made conditional on the regime granting it power. Like Mayakovsky, who “believed himself ‘requisitioned’ by the Bolsheviks, ‘mobilized and called’ by the Revolution,” who considered the Revolution his own and proudly declared, “I

am happy to be a part of this power,” the intelligentsia of the first promising years of *perestroika*, basking in its new-found recognition and titillated by governmental attentions, believed itself finally called to play the leading part in history (which rightfully belonged to it as “the brain of the people [and] the consciousness of the nation” [Kiva, 1993, p. 164]³), and called the reform its own. “We should understand Mayakovsky,” wrote Chegodayeva, “we too experienced happiness of this sort, when we stood, holding hands, at the walls of the White House during the nights of August 1991” (1993, p. 4). “Democratic freedoms” were then synonymous with the increased “role of the intelligentsia” (Granin, 1993); and while this was so, they were not willing to give them up.

Like many a Russian tsar, the attitude of Gorbachev to the intelligentsia was ambivalent. He clearly tried to coopt it, because he both feared it and seemed to be convinced that its support was indispensable for the success of his undertaking. Whatever his reservations, the intelligentsia felt welcome to participate in the increasingly uncontrollable political process. The last years of the Soviet Union, like the last years of tsarist Russia, witnessed a dramatic surge in political activism within its ranks. Countless political associations, blocks, and platforms sprung up; writers and scholars ran for political office and took important positions in the administration. The politically active intelligentsia was mostly the so-called “humanitarian,” or writing and talking, intelligentsia,⁴ and within it no academic specialization appeared too remote from the quotidian or too esoteric to prevent its usually reclusive practitioners from enthusiastically plunging into the fray. For a while, a specialist in Greek epigraphy was the Deputy Foreign Minister, while “junior research associates” of various Academic Institutes, as the cliché went, “ruled the day” in many electoral bodies (Kiva, 1993, p. 173).

The collective hopes—as always—focused on literature. Few in this heady and confident period doubted that Russian writers were the “intellectual creators” of reform, as they were

of previous Russian revolutions, and that its success or failure ultimately depended on them (Chernyshev, 1990). "In the beginning was the Word," pontificated an admirer of Solzhenitsyn upon reading the first installments of *The Gulag Archipelago* which then began to appear on the pages of *Novy Mir* (his familiarity with the *oeuvre* of the great author being apparently limited to them). "It is the ultimate cause [of all], the impulse" (Potapov, 1990, p. 209). Literature, the Russian intelligentsia's greatest gift to the nation, the value of which was undisputed, has always been for them its central symbol, its "collective representation," the quintessential expression both of its creativity and moral, therefore political, significance. In the early years of the reform, Solzhenitsyn, the greatest Russian writer alive, became the symbol of Russian literature. Briefly—and, remarkably, *before any of his major works were published in Russia*—the cult of literature, that form of traditional collective worship and adoration which for two centuries maintained the intelligentsia's sense of self-satisfaction, focused on him. Potapov, the author of the homily quoted above, exulted:

The phenomenon of Solzhenitsyn is not limited to the framework of literature—it broadens our spiritual horizons. . . . the soul needs faith—in someone and something. This faith many of us found in Solzhenitsyn. I mean a civil religion, perhaps. But the spirit of the times and the tension of the quest [?] created an atmosphere that was quite sacral. The most famous work of the writer, *The Gulag Archipelago*, became legendary . . . —often even for those who never read him . . . Is it a wonder we expected [of its publication] miracles?

The specific miracle expected was apparently something along the lines of a new cognitive and moral map that would end the ideological confusion and make life manageable again, a new answer to the questions, "What should we do, and how should we live?" It would give direction to the disoriented society but make politics in effect unnecessary, and create a unity of purpose in the frustrating new world in which it

became increasingly difficult to distinguish good from evil and, as a result, in which friends were often mistaken for enemies. The publication of *The Gulag Archipelago* did not realize these expectations, and toward the end of the essay (just before consoling himself and his readers with the mantra that “in the beginning was the Word”), our eulogist did ask, somewhat disconcertedly, “And so—it was published, and yet where is the universal dialogue that we expected, where is the great awakening?” (Potapov, 1990, p. 209).

In the meantime, less legendary writers (who lived and many of whom published in Russia, thus leaving a record which made it unreasonable to expect that they could work political miracles) were taking front positions in the factional fight for the resolution of the other great question: “Who, among the intelligentsia, will lead the country to the bright future?” This fight, as was immediately noticed, took the form of “a bombastic journalistic brawl [under the banners of] the ancient battle between the Slavophiles and the Westernizers” (Chernyshev, 1990, p. 149). From its earliest beginnings, the intelligentsia defined its place in society (that is, defined itself) in terms of Russian nationalism and articulated Russian nationalism (of which it was the chief, if not the sole, collective architect) in terms which implied the central importance of the intelligentsia for the nation.⁵ Within this group, a crisis of identity would be experienced inevitably as a crisis of national identity, even if not prompted (as in this case it was) by the change in the national self-definition and a dramatic and painful alteration in the nation’s prestige and political significance. As the intelligentsia tried to reorient in view of the suddenly opened opportunities, the national sentiments which were already and independently excited flared up, and the preoccupation with the nature and mission of the intelligentsia in the new situation was invariably connected, in fact was at the same time a preoccupation, with the condition and destiny of Russia. Since Russian nationalism has been historically represented in two related but seemingly divergent

traditions, Slavophilism and Westernism, members of the intelligentsia naturally turned to and assumed their positions within them. The initial choice of one or the other was conditioned psychologically as much as socially and depended on temperament as well as family circumstances, profession and position within a profession, and ethnic affiliation. Jews, who in terms of their visibility and numerical presence form a very significant element within the Russian intelligentsia, were Westernists willy-nilly; the other option available to them was to leave. Natural scientists and the so-called “technical intelligentsia” tended to be Westernist, but then from the beginning there were notable exceptions, such as the eminent physicist, mathematician, and author of *Russophobia*, Igor Shafarevich, and the founders of the notorious “*Pamiat*” in the natural science preserve of Novosibirsk. Writers tended toward Slavophilism—they had a vested interest in Russia’s *unique* culture, though obviously there was some differentiation in their ranks too, and some well-known authors resigned from the staunchly Slavophile Writers’ Union of the Russian Republic and formed Westernist organizations of their own.

In an insightful essay, “*Intelligentsia*⁶ in the Hour of Trial,” which appeared in *Novy Mir* in the summer of 1993, when the period of the intelligentsia’s political activism was coming to an end, Alexei Kiva proposed that “the phenomenon of Westernism is, in its essence, the reaction of the society to backwardness,” while “the phenomenon of Slavophilism is rather a reaction to progress . . . the reaction of that part of the society which is not sure of itself, from the start fearful of defeat in competition with those who are stronger, . . . instinctively seeking isolation” (Kiva, 1993, p. 164). One can add to this an observation that historically Westernism in Russia has been the more popular and populous camp, but the Slavophile position has always been more articulate (because great Russian writers, as a rule, subscribed to and articulated it) and, for this reason, far more influential in shaping people’s thinking. Westernism indeed has been the attitude of those

impatient with Russia's backwardness, yet confident that it could be overcome; it, therefore, was characteristic of the brief periods of optimism with which Russian revolutions from above were usually met. In the periods of pessimism, which invariably replaced them and which it seems were always more prolonged, Slavophilism gained strength. This pattern repeated itself in the last decade, and today most of the intelligentsia, probably—and most of the politically active intelligentsia certainly—is again Slavophile (unless, of course, we are speaking of Jews or that special category of people who are defined as “those *related* to persons of Jewish nationality”).

In the early period under discussion, however, both Westernism and Slavophilism were, among other things, cards in an exciting and new political game. This was made clear by the speeches at the VII Plenary Meeting of the Writers' Union of the Russian Republic. The meeting took place in March 1990, shortly after the first democratic elections to the Russian Soviet of People's Deputies, in which the Slavophile platform, “For Popular Accord and Russia's Regeneration,” suffered a humiliating defeat (Saraskina, 1990). The platform was represented by 61 candidates, many of them well-known authors and members of the Writers' Union; only three were elected in the end, none of them writers. The representatives of the Russian literature were shocked by such an unexpected expression of the will of the Russian electorate—their readers, the “people”—made all the more unpalatable by the resounding success of the rival platform, “Democratic Russia,” whose candidates, though also members of the intelligentsia, apparently were not members of the Writers' Union and did not have its endorsement. The speeches at the Plenary Meeting reflected their vexation. A certain V. G. Briusova attributed the otherwise incomprehensible defeat of “our best forces, literally the flower of our intelligentsia, among whom [there were] not a few renowned and respected writers, poets, and literary critics” at the hands of “a band of political gangsters” to the “help of Uncle Sam.” A fellow literator, V. Chikin,

complained that “Democratic Russia” “arrogated the name of our [that is, properly belonging to the Writers’ Union] democracy, our Russia, and under that name debauched at the elections.” This intriguing line of argument was consistently developed in a speech by V. Bondarenko, who argued that the cause of the camp’s defeat lay in the fact that it “played with black figures” (using a metaphor from chess). Instead of taking the lead in the process of reform—that is, putting “democracy” in its program and constructing its platform in terms of the currently popular Westernism—it was merely reacting. “[Democracy],” claimed Bondarenko, “was our national slogan, and to give it up to all sorts of extremists, entirely devoid of democratic consciousness was one of our gravest mistakes. . . . Because of this we lost and are still losing millions of voters and readers. . . . It is us, the Russian writers, who should have inscribed on our banner: ‘Democratic Russia’” (Saraskina, 1990, pp. 194–95). In other words, the Writers’s Union entered the fray a tad too late, and their Slavophilism was forced; it was the only choice they had because the Westernist position was already taken. It was nothing but product differentiation strategy—such as it could have been in a market limited to only two commodities. But the die was cast. The writers had tied their political fate to the *reactionary* position, however arbitrarily chosen and unpopular for the moment, and a slippery slope carried them farther and farther away from democracy against which they apparently had so little.

As it happened, the lucky draw proved to be theirs. For the game played by the Westernist intelligentsia—that is, the “democrats”—did not turn out well. To begin with, the Westernist platform, as usual, was not well defined. From the start, the Westernist camp was torn by conflict, and because the issues were not clear, it was conflict over precedence. Alexei Kiva wrote in his penetrating essay:

Many in the movement that styled itself ‘democratic’ were united only by hatred, the rejection of the established order . . . the

struggle against [rather than] for . . . Did those who were fighting against—against communism—fully understand the implications of their struggle? . . . Turns out, many dissidents in fact did not understand not only what they were fighting for (with the exception of such banalities as ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ in the abstract), but what they were fighting against as well (Kiva, 1993, p. 174).

The realization that communist order was tightly connected to the integrity of the empire and that the weakening of the one implied undermining the other came early in the process, and having realized this fact, many former fighters for “democracy,” that is, Westernist dissidents, turned into nationalists, that is, Slavophile reactionaries. For many of those who remained loyal to the reform agenda longer, Kiva writes, “the anti-communist revolution became ‘the revolution of unrealized hopes.’ They associated with it their personal advancement, success, but were deceived in their expectations” (Kiva, 1993, p. 174). They felt unappreciated and insulted and “emotionally hurt by Yeltsin.” Their vexation was exacerbated by the “disappointments with post-communist reality,” specifically the *dolce vita* of some made possible by the introduction of market economy, that is, by the recognition that others were able to profit from the revolution which left their expectations unfulfilled. And so they renounced it. The new regime, they declared, was “not ours” (Kiva, 1993, pp. 173–75).

As 1993 was rolling on, the intelligentsia as a group, already wholly disaffected from the process of reform, was in the throws of a crisis of consciousness that was turning into a collective depression. The situation was reassessed once again, now with very different conclusions, and the expectations of expanded scope for its activity and the realization of its collective hopes for what its members believed to be their rightful place in society gave way to the sense of doom and gloom and the suspicion bordering on certainty that in a democratic society it had no place whatsoever. In one publication after another essays appeared that predicted, or

already mourned, the death of the intelligentsia in Russia. Stanislav Rassadin claimed that it had died long ago, ceasing to exist as a stratum even before the Revolution of 1917 (which only accelerated its disintegration and only persecuted individual *intelligents*); its “social basis” was eroded by the evolution of capitalism in Russia, and its social role was fulfilled. This being so, it was senseless to bemoan the fact that it was denied this role in the 1990’s. Conversely, it was unfair to blame the intelligentsia, a class distinguished by nobility of spirit and refined sensibility, for proving powerless against “brutes and cads” (Rassadin, 1993, p. 3). Daniil Granin was of the opinion that the death blow was being delivered today. Reading in newspapers about the end of the intelligentsia, however, he found objectionable the argument that it disappeared because “the conditions of its existence were liquidated.” Such conditions never existed, he insisted. “Under the tsar as well as later [the intelligentsia was persecuted]. From some point on, it was simply exterminated, plucked like a weed. It suffered at the hands of the authorities as well as the people. . . . A Central European intellectual would not survive in such conditions. But the Russian *intelligent* lived, reproduced, talked, and even communicated a certain spiritual veneer to our society.”

Still, “the tragedy [was] in that today the intelligentsia—and above everyone else the intelligentsia—[was] placed in such conditions, in which it [was] less and less able to withstand the pressure of life.” The deadly conditions of today, unlike the conditions of the harsh yet life-enabling environment of the past, were like a virus. They penetrated the body of the intelligentsia itself and destroyed it from within. “The Soviet *intelligent* was formed in kitchen conversations, in the reading of Samizdat, in [collective] trips abroad, [forced] work in *kolkhozes* and vegetable storehouses.” With democratization, such corporate gatherings lost their—natural or artificial—attraction. “Even kitchens, where, after all, however deformed and muffled, public opinion was generated” no longer drew

people to sit and talk. In retrospect, Granin mused, “we came to realize that this public opinion for years offered resistance to the party propaganda. It established its own standards, made [and unmade] reputations. Some it defined as decent people, considered others sycophants and reactionaries.⁷ One gets the impression that today no one is able to create such public opinion.” In other words, the vibrant *civil society*, which flourished under the repressive Soviet regime, has been destroyed.

It has been destroyed, Granin continued in this Tocquevillean vein, because of the atomization of society, the growing individualism, itself a product of the new, commercial mentality which accompanies the introduction of market reform.

People gather less often; life, frequently, becomes restricted to the family shell; this disassociation takes away the sense of responsibility. Intelligentsia’s characteristic mentality needs a proper environment; this environment melts away; the market dissolves it, carrying some of it into exchanges, banks, grasping [its] people with a merciless grip. Spirituality and other qualities are as if put aside . . . The transformation is rapid. One glance, and where before one saw noble, radiant, or perhaps colored by sadness and reflection, faces, the eyes meet the snouts of swine. The brain-drain to the West is less worrisome than the drain of souls and spirituality to the today’s wild market.

The Russian intelligentsia, Granin clearly believed, was selling its birthright for a mess of pottage: it had the strength of spirit to defy the all-powerful state and did not have the will to resist the lure of the market. The enemy was within. Given the gravity of the situation, the preoccupation with the political role of the intelligentsia in the new order seemed frivolous. Granin wrote:

A couple of days ago I heard on the TV the usual question: what is today the role of the intelligentsia? I thought that, thank God, it has no role at all. I remembered how we [writers and scientists] were deputies . . . and some even made speeches in the Supreme

Soviet. What a dilettantism this all was! . . . we dutifully played a role of politicians . . . Rather than playing a role, the intelligentsia should simply be—as the moral, spiritual ferment of society.

He asked if such an intelligentsia has a place “in the new life” and answered, “To be honest, I don’t know” (Granin, 1993).

The market for the intelligentsia proved to be a harsh master. Not only did they discover to their surprise that one had to toil in the sweat of one’s brow (in other words, actually to work) to taste of its bounty, but—of far greater consequence—it mixed them with *hoi polloi*. This was the crux of the problem. Much of the discussion about the essence and the role of the intelligentsia focused precisely on this aspect of it, and numerous attempts to define the group, which were, in effect, attempts to distinguish it from the so-called “masses” and prove its superiority, suggested that its crisis of identity was caused not by the introduction of market mechanisms and the materialism they fostered, but by democratization and by the fact that the Russian intelligentsia as a group was inherently, fundamentally opposed to democracy.

A persistent new theme sounded in this discussion—the theme of the continuity and kinship, if not identity, between the Russian/Soviet intelligentsia and the Russian nobility. It allowed the construction of several arguments, some of them leading to conclusions quite unflattering for the intelligentsia. An example is a biting essay by Maxim Sokolov (1993) in *Stolitsa*, which presented the intelligentsia as a class of hereditary exploiters of their own people, treating it with contempt and posing, with no justification at all, as its benefactors. (The essay was fittingly entitled, “The Lord and the Peasant.” The image, apparently, suggested itself naturally, and in 1996 yet another treatment of the relationship between the intelligentsia and the people, both in the past, when in actuality it was a part of the nobility, and today, appeared in *Novy Mir* under an almost identical title, “Peasants and Lords.” In distinction to Sokolov’s essay, “Peasants and Lords” was

non-judgmental and presumed simply to state the facts [Basinskii, 1996].) Even Sokolov's negative interpretation of the connection between the elites of tsarist and Soviet Russia implied the existence of a chasm between the intelligentsia and the other strata in contemporary society. Most of the essays which touched on this theme not only implied this chasm, but also, by giving the proposition "intelligentsia as the descendant of the nobility" a positive interpretation, intimated the legitimacy of the intelligentsia's claims to the status of an aristocracy and the illegitimacy of denying it this status, namely, the illegitimacy of the new "democratic" order.

In February 1993, this theme was developed by the Academician D. S. Likhachev, an eminent scholar of Russian antiquity. His contribution carried particular weight, for he was long universally considered to be one of a handful of elders and leaders of the intelligentsia. Some months later, his name was included with only one other in the following grandiloquent prologue to yet another definition of the group: "When we begin to speak publicly of the intelligentsia, we instantly turn to the circle of names, to personalities from its loftiest summits, to the names, to use a metaphor, of its apostles, such as Likhachev and Averintsev" (Borschagovsky, 1993). Likhachev's contribution was an open—and lengthy—letter to *Novy Mir* with an authoritative sobriquet, "On the Russian Intelligentsia," which, he explained, he felt compelled to write by "the current situation" in order to reflect ("and not for the first time") on the question, "What, after all, is the place, what is the role and significance of the intelligentsia in our society." These, the place, role, and significance, were presumed to inhere in the nature of the stratum, and thus again the intelligentsia had to be defined before an answer to the question could be reasonably attempted. Here, however, Likhachev faced a problem, since, he argued, "we, Russians, often prefer emotional concepts to logical definitions." He, therefore, approached the phenomenon by way of particularly striking examples and associations. The distinguishing characteristic of the intelligentsia, he was led to conclude, was its sense of dignity,

which reflected its traditional loathing of despotism and made it despotism's implacable and courageous enemy. He mentioned several *intelligents* of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, referred to Pushkin as "an unmistakable *intelligent*," but lingered on a few cases which he thought exemplified the attitude of the intelligentsia to Soviet authorities. These were all cases of the intelligentsia of noble origins. Likhachev marvelled:

What lofty and courageous *intelligents* were the *intelligents* from hereditary nobility! I often remember Georgii Mikhailovich Osorgin, executed on October 28, 1929, in Solovki. He was already in the cell of the condemned, when, unexpectedly for the authorities, his wife (nee Golitzyna [that is, also of exalted aristocratic blood]) came to visit him. . . . On his word of honor, Osorgin was allowed out of the cell to see his wife, on the condition that he would not tell her of the fate that awaited him. And he kept the word, given to the hangmen. . . . Or the one-legged professor of ballistics Pokrovskii, who resisted [arrest?] . . . , hitting the guards with his wooden leg, only in order not to be [classified as/with] 'obedient herd'. . . .

These were indeed examples of admirable personal courage and dignity, as well as perhaps of the corporate code of honor, characteristic of hereditary aristocracy in Russia and elsewhere. But Likhachev thought such acts of *noblesse oblige* proved that the Russian intelligentsia—that specific "purely Russian" social group—"as a whole passed the ordeal by our 'Time of Troubles'" and offered them in order to fulfill his "duty—to restore justice in the attitude [of society] toward the intelligentsia." Its aristocratism of spirit, its proud defiance (with an emphasis, most probably, on "proud")—in short, its *nobility* as such apparently set the intelligentsia apart and above the multitude, which it was natural to expect to be both deferential and grateful. The letter ended, indeed, with a rhetorical question that was at the same time a plea for appreciation: "Could it be that we [society] again, in the manner of Bolsheviks, shall leave the intelligentsia unappreciated and underestimate its role in the life of our peoples?" (Likhachev, 1993, pp. 3–9).

By the time this was published, it seems, the intelligentsia had already answered this question in the affirmative and concluded that in the life of a democratic Russia there was no role it either could or would play. The title of the essay in which Likhachev was named as one of the two apostles of the intelligentsia said it all. It was nothing less than "An Oration on the Funeral of the Intelligentsia," and the finality it communicated was only slightly softened by the author's faith in the group's eventual resurrection. "I am convinced," wrote Alexander Borschagovskii ardently, "that despite the moral fall of so many, despite the widespread resentment and dangerous overflow of bile in society, despite convulsive expressions of greed—despite all . . . , the intelligentsia will come out of the historical trial healthier and stronger than it was: the resistance to moral disintegration and evil, even if only silent resistance, [always] makes an *intelligent* stronger." His readers were more likely to agree with the passage that immediately preceded this tirade: "when one is oppressed by shameless and vulgar commercialism, when falsehood and pauperism and crime increase tenfold, one may well think that the half-starving (and starving as well!) intelligentsia has been terminally defeated." It was clear by September 2, 1993, when the article appeared, that the intelligentsia *en masse* thought so. How radical was the transformation in its collective sentiments, how complete its disaffection from the new regime that was barely born and feebly struggled to stay alive, and its disillusionment with democracy was demonstrated one month later, when the conflict between the democratically elected executive and legislature came to a head and the cause of "democratization" was once again in danger. This time, barely 25 months after the glorious days of August 1991, they already knew that this cause was not "their own." They resolved that "the society in which the cream of the crop became the scum was sick" (*Literaturnaya Gazeta*, April 17, 1996, p. 16).⁸ And they let their parliament burn and moved to their dachas.

The intelligentsia's collective disappointment demonstrated yet

again the sagacity of the apocryphal dictum to the effect that one should be careful what one wishes for, because one's wish could be granted. Afflicted by this peculiar misfortune, the group assumed its traditional posture of contempt for the government and politics as such, ideologically transferring its solicitude from limping democracy to ailing Russia (and thus away from its so recent hero, President Yeltsin, who might have been democracy's only hope but was definitely Russia's despoiler) but in practice withdrawing into apathy. Only clear and present danger could arouse the intelligentsia, and by the spring of 1996 the danger became clear and present. A new political society was recently formed, "Russian Intelligentsia for Yeltsin," and its press release of March 14 this year announced that however depressing the prospect of Yeltsin's continued presidency, that of Zyuganov and the communists threatened far greater distress and was altogether unacceptable for the following reasons:

In the [communist] camps 600 writers perished, including the genius Mandelstam; as early as during Lenin's [leadership] our most eminent philosophers, such as Berdiayev and others, were expelled from the country; deprived of the means of subsistence, the great painter Filonov died in Leningrad of starvation; under Khrushchev, writers and artists were persecuted; under Brezhnev, two future Noble-prize authors—Brodsky and Solzhenitsyn—were exiled from the USSR, while painters were crushed with bulldozers.

The press release further warned, "Apolitical young writers should reflect that were communists to take power, they [the apolitical writers] would have to go underground again, they would not be allowed to publish either in Russia or in the West, would be no longer able to read Henry Miller or Louis Celine, marquis de Sade or Kandinski and Malevich. . . ." Therefore, the spokesmen of "Russian Intelligentsia for Yeltsin" concluded: "To prevent this from happening again, we call on you to give your votes to Boris Yeltsin. Out of two evils any normal person would choose the least. Lets be normal!" (Valeri Pisigin, commenting on the press-release in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, could not help to quip in

mock approval: "Indeed, what normal person would vote for Zyuganov and the communist party, if they could disallow the reading of marquis de Sade in Russia? In comparison to the peril of never again being able to read *Justine* pales the danger of leaving unread the volumes of Kandinski and Malevich, especially their novels, so dear to the people" [Pisigin, 1996]).

The intelligentsia's endorsement of Yeltsin, clearly extorted under duress, underscores the difficulty of the group's situation. It wants to have its cake and eat it too; it wants both freedom (which presupposes democracy) and guaranteed prestige (to which democracy is antithetical). Both come with a price-tag, and in both cases the prices bite: freedom must be acquired at the cost of possible insignificance, but prestige is tied to the probability of persecution. Averse to commercial transactions of any sort, the intelligentsia does not want to pay, and true to its maximalist tradition, it finds no solace in the realism of that piece of capitalist ethic: "No pain, no gain." It wants to have all the gains and none of the losses. And so it does not see the gains, unless they are threatened.

The greatest loss of "the period of transition" in fact may be democracy's loss of the affections of the only social group ever to cherish its ideals. The intelligentsia's perception of democracy as an evil, even if a lesser one than communism, makes its establishment in Russia unlikely. The fact that for no class in the Russian society it is a good, in other words, that nobody wants it, seems to be a more serious obstacle on the path of democratization than "the Red Scare" represented by Gennady Zyuganov. And this, among other things, means that we really need not be concerned about the outcome of this summer's elections, whatever it is. It does not matter.

Notes

¹ The result is impressionistic. The focus is on the publications of 1993, the year of the manifest withdrawal of the intelligentsia from

the political process, which are supplemented by random gleanings from 1990 (three years earlier) and 1996 (three years later). A more systematic, comprehensive survey for the entire period of 1985 to the present would, obviously, be very welcome and may constitute a worthy project for a senior or an M.A. thesis. It is dubious, however, that more evidence would reveal anything but more of the same: the trends appear to be quite clear and fit the historical pattern. (It should also be noted that publications, such as *Nash Sovremennik*, explicitly identified as nationalistic, were left out on purpose. They require a separate discussion.)

² “Today Berdiayev, Frank, Struve, and other [authors of *Vekhi*] suddenly became the idols of the Russian educated stratum,” noted Sergei Chernyshev, in an essay revealingly entitled “New Landmarks [*Novye Vekhi*]” (1990, p. 150). (*Vekhi* means landmarks in English.)

³ These epithets, says the author, were most common.

⁴ In its Russian usage, the term “intelligentsia” in fact presupposes political activism, but as Alexei Kiva (1993, p. 160) points out, “what is meant is not the entire class or stratum, which consists of a huge mass of people—teachers, physicians, engineers, agronomists, etc,—but only the layer of creative intelligentsia, and even that not in its entirety, but only that [part of it] which is distinguished by an exceptional social activism, sets the tone in literature, the arts, the media, and social sciences, and displays a heightened fondness for ‘winding up the people.’”

⁵ On the dual nature of the intelligentsia’s identity and its collective commitment to the values of Russian nationalism, see Greenfeld, 1995. More generally on Russian nationalism, see Greenfeld, 1992.

⁶ In the original title the word is put in Latin, rather than Cyrillic, script, apparently to emphasize the general Westernism of the group.

⁷ The idiosyncratic and untranslatable term Granin actually uses is “*chernosotentsy*,” that is, such that could be members of the radical right-wing populist “Black Hundreds” of the late tsarist period.

⁸ The actual text is, “When the society is sick, the cream of the crop becomes its scum.”

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