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Chapter 5
Intelligentsia as a Liberal Concept in Soviet History, 1945–1991

Vladislav Zubok

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There was no liberalism as a consistent political and intellectual movement in Soviet history; it was destroyed by the Russian revolution and the Bolshevik terror. During the Cold War scores of Western observers searched for "liberals" in Soviet society. Instead, they found the intelligentsia, which remained—in the period after Stalin's death—a remarkably tenacious collective subject embodying real and imagined liberal, as well as socialist, qualities. The emergence of this subject was a major phenomenon of post-1945 Soviet history, a part of its transition from late Stalinism to

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de-Stalinization. Yet its prominence in late Soviet society was far from predetermined. In Soviet official language, "intelligentsia" had nothing to do with creative freedom and liberal inclinations. It designated a broad social group that included educated professionals, scientists, engineers, scholars, teachers, artists and people of culture. Just like Soviet society as a whole, the intelligentsia was both a sociological and ideological category. It represented a link between the productive basis of Soviet society and its mission to create a new type of person for "socialism". The Soviet intelligentsia was both a motor and an embodiment of this social engineering, whose tasks and objectives were defined by the communist party, the real "vanguard of Soviet society". The relationship between the ruling party and the intelligentsia, however, was always a problem for the communist regime. This problem was about using the skills of the intelligentsia, while keeping their intellectual "anarchism" under strict control. Ultimately, however, the intelligentsia's "socialist men and women" became grave-diggers of the Soviet system and the Soviet Union itself.[1]

From the moment the Bolsheviks took power, the members of the intelligentsia—Russian and non-Russian alike—represented a serious challenge to the new dictatorship. They had to be recruited to the cause of constructing a new economy, society and culture, and yet they were regarded as the most dangerous potential enemies of the new order. The Bolshevik regime had consigned the old intelligentsia to the status of "former people", those who had sided with the reactionary classes and were indeed part of them. Thousands of educated people perished in the "red terror" and civil war, thousands more emigrated, and countless others were deported and jailed in the GULag. Yet the Bolshevik rulers had to recognize that their ambitious revolutionary program of modernization could not be implemented without people of education, science and advanced professional skills. This tension between the two poles in Bolshevik policies was finally resolved through the deliberate construction of a specifically Soviet intelligentsia. The concept was inscribed in the Soviet constitution and implemented as a set of state-funded guilds and institutions, where "engineers of the human soul" (as Stalin called Soviet writers) could overcome their "bourgeois" origins and work to help build socialism.

The construction of a Soviet intelligentsia became one of Stalin's most successful projects. The intelligentsia became a crucial tool in many of his objectives, from the build-up of military–industrial potential and war mobilization to cultural reproduction. At the same time, because of improvisation, haste, and various pressures and demands, the intelligentsia of Stalin's time combined features that did not fit into the clear-cut "totalitarian" matrix. It inherited from the now defunct prerevolutionary intelligentsia its revolutionary utopianism and messianism, even its nationalism and romanticism. The Soviet utopia, even at the time of Stalin's dictatorship, continued to appeal to the ideals of social justice and humanism; for many

[1] Many points in this chapter build on my previously-published works. See Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2009) and Vladislav Zubok, *The Idea of Russia: The Life and Work of Dmitry Likhachev* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

intellectuals these ideals helped to justify "temporary" realities—terror, the GULag, a slave economy, the omnipotence of the police state and widespread misery. The diaries of such remarkable scientists and thinkers as Vladimir Vernadsky and Sergei Vavilov—people of great integrity—testify to this collective delusion. The supreme objectives of the Soviet project, the creation of a modern—but non-capitalist—society, appeared to be justified and necessary in the eyes of intellectuals, from the scientist Vavilov to the poet Boris Pasternak. These hugely ambitious objectives dictated dictatorial means; backwardness inherited from the past could only be overcome by heroic efforts to realize gigantic Enlightenment projects and colossal scientific achievements. The repressive policies and campaigns, which stifled creativity and free thought, would become "negated" in the Hegelian sense by the inexorable progress of education and science. In the idealist vision of the Soviet future, the social order would have to become not only the most advanced in the world scientifically, but culturally as well. The ideals of self-cultivation and self-improvement through culture—understood in terms of the nineteenth century European Romanticism—became a mantra for millions, and the Soviet intelligentsia was supposed to embody and propagate that mantra.

The liberalizing impulses of the Soviet intelligentsia surfaced during the Second World War; the patriotic surge and the victory over Nazism inspired many intellectuals. Those impulses brought about hopes that Stalin and the party–state structures would tolerate more freedom of expression. Instead, Stalin crushed what one historian has defined as "wartime de-Stalinization".[2] The ruler of the Soviet Union directed Soviet elites with an iron hand to the new mammoth task of competing with the United States and its allies in the emerging Cold War. Stalinist campaigns of "patriotic education" of the intelligentsia proved to be a horrifying experience, destructive and divisive both in the physical and in the moral sense. Still, as scholars indicate, late Stalinism did not extinguish the intelligentsia's romantic idealism. Moreover, this idealism was even stronger in the optimistic cohorts of students that filled Soviet universities and institutions of science after 1945. The overwhelming presence of thugs, cynics, careerists, and secret police agents only highlighted by contrast the grandiose nature of the utopia. As Gilbert K. Chesterton wrote in his biography of Charles Dickens, the time of optimism is also the time of darkness, when the dawn of the better future contrasts with the silhouette of the guillotine. In the Soviet Union, the silhouettes of watch towers in the concentration camps contrasted with great postwar optimism and a strong belief in a grandiose future. This was the time of the quack agronomist Trofim Lysenko, his pogrom in biology, and countless frauds and careerists in every field of Soviet science and culture. Yet this was also time of huge expansion in the Soviet scientific-technical sector, where remarkable people, such as Andrei Sakharov, worked. The state imprisoned millions, but also funded the "Knowledge Society"—a national network of Enlightenment projects, including organized lectures for workers and peasants—

[2] Elena Zubkova, *Russia After the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945–1957* (London–New York: Routledge, 1998).

and supported "Literary Monuments", a magisterial series of translated classical texts representing human civilization and culture.

5.1 The Paradoxes of the Thaw Intelligentsia

Stalin's death and the sporadic, halting de-Stalinization that challenged the utopian vision embedded in the Soviet intelligentsia, and the revolutionary eschatology of the future was forced to face the specter of the past. Two awkward manifestations arose in this context. One was a déjà vu of the Tsarist times, when the revolutionary intelligentsia had faced police persecution, anti-Semitism and Russian imperial chauvinism. A similar phenomenon occurred in the 1940s when the Stalinist regime had become openly reactionary and Russo-centric. The second was the public revelations of the enormity of Stalinist repression and crimes. De-Stalinization also posed a novel question about the future: who would lead Soviet society into the future and guarantee against new disastrous errors and detractions? Khrushchev's answer was the communist party itself, restored as a Leninist vehicle of revolutionary progress.[3] This answer, however, did not satisfy many Soviet intellectuals. The party had failed to stop Stalin and had even allowed him to destroy its best cadres. This brought up a nagging question about the "degeneration" of the communist party during Stalin's years, its bureaucratization and intellectual demise. Almost every charismatic and intellectual Bolshevik had been murdered and of those sent to the GULag, only a few returned. Careerism and cynicism permeated the ranks of Stalinist appointees (*vydvizhentsy*) and their manifest anti-intellectualism threatened to make a mockery of the promise of "a collective mind" of the party. Nikita Khrushchev, the father of the "return to Leninism", was clearly no Lenin, but rather a smart, half-literate peasant lacking the necessary skills to assume the mantle of the leader of global communism.[4]

Doubts about the past and the future and the absence of an unquestionable leading authority profoundly affected the postwar cohorts of educated Soviet youth, the second generation of the Soviet intelligentsia. After 1945, multitudes of newly educated people were brought up to join the ranks of the Soviet elite. The Soviet leadership assumed that these individuals would not only replace the politically unreliable imperial-era scientists and intellectuals, but also compensate for the enormous losses incurred during the Second World War and help the Soviet Union to compete with the developed West in the emerging Cold War. This was the generation on

[3] Donald A. Filtzer, *The Khrushchev Era: De-Stalinization and the Limits of Reform in the USSR, 1953–1964* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993); William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (London–New York: Free Press–W.W. Norton, 2003); Miriam Dobson, "The Post-Stalin era: De-Stalinization, Daily Life, and Dissent", *Kritika* 12, no. 4, 2011, pp. 905–924.

[4] Julian Fuerst, Polly Jones, and Susan Morrissey, "The Relaunch of the Soviet Project, 1945–1964: Introduction", *The Slavonic and East European Review* 86, no. 2, 2013, pp. 201–207; Polly Jones (ed.), *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinisation: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era* (New York–London: Routledge, 2006).

whose intellectual power and patriotism the outcome of the bipolar confrontation would depend.

For the postwar cohort, then, the 1950s were a time of hope and creativity but also a new pathos. De-Stalinization threatened to kill this budding optimism and idealism and turn utopia into dystopia. Almost instinctively, university students turned to the time-proven salvation: Russian literature. The first literary debates of 1954–1956 supplied a much-needed conversation that updated the utopian vision; "sincerity" in those debates was a quest for integrity, yet also the need to preserve a revolutionary democratic idealism. Vladimir Dudintsev's 1956 novel *Not By Bread Alone* presented a crucial binary for the post-Stalin idealism of the second generation of the Soviet intelligentsia. The novel tells the story of an idealistic innovator opposed by a career bureaucrat. The young new thinker came to represent the imagined and idealized intelligentsia; the career hack stood for the ruling party.[5]

From that time on, the imagined role of intelligentsia in the Soviet society found a second wind. While the party and Khrushchev had clearly failed to fill Lenin's and Stalin's shoes, scientists and intellectuals in general, became the new ideal types of a new imagined community: a Thaw intelligentsia. Artists and people of performative arts began to represent intelligentsia on screen, stage, and canvass as new paragons of modernity. No longer cast as bizarre relics from the past, a distinctly "former people", they were now mysterious gurus paving the road into the future, who knew everything and discussed everything with authority. The "socialist realism" texts and films still presented party officials as virtuous and strong figures. The latter, however, provided an increasingly negative contrast to the intellectuals. As members of the Soviet intelligentsia liberated from the constraints of the past, the intellectuals nevertheless hued still to the ideals of the revolutionary project. Liberating this project from the pressures of the party–state bureaucracy became, in the eyes of many, a general precondition for progress toward communism.

A later debate among Soviet intellectuals, which would erupt in the early 1960s, was about which parts of the Soviet intelligentsia had more capacity for liberation. In the spontaneous dialectic between physicists and lyricists, the people of humanities appeared to be far too corrupted by official and self-censorship (as well as careerism), their language stifled and stunted. Scientists and engineers, on the other hand, spoke in the universal language of formulas and logarithms; they—especially the nuclear physicists, as imagined by Mikhail Romm in the 1962 film *Nine Days in One Year*—appeared to be remarkably free, basking in the glory of discovering eternal sources of energy and solving the mysteries of space. Two emigres from the Soviet Union, Pyotr Vail and Alexander Genis, would later write about this period of optimism thus: "Scientists were to succeed politicians. Hard science would replace imprecise ideology. Technocracy, instead of partocracy, would lead the country toward utopia".[6]

[5] Priscilla Johnson, *Khrushchev and the Arts: The Politics of Soviet Culture, 1962–1964* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965); Denis Kozlov, *The Readers of Novyi Mir: Coming to Terms with the Stalinist Past* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

[6] Peter Vail and Aleksandr Ghenis, *60–e. Mir sovetskogo cheloveka* (Moskva: AST, 2014); Mark

The people of literature and art lost the debate between "physicists and lyricists", yet it was they who contributed the main humanist content to the ethos of the Thaw intelligentsia. Writers like Ilya Ehrenburg and young poets, such as Evgeny Yevtushenko and Bella Akhmadullina, sought to articulate the humanitarian mission that linked revolutionary democracy with love, remembrance, and the perennial importance of culture. During the 1960s, the literary journal *Novy Mir*, under the ambitious editorship of Aleksandr Tvardovsky, attempted to return literature to its central place as the main shaper of hearts and souls and the leading patriotic and critical force of the society. Despite spectacular achievements, this turned out to be a losing battle. Tvardovsky's agenda was limited, and ultimately ruined by state censorship. The famous literary critics of *Novy Mir* tried to launch public discussions about the role of culture and literature in the great Soviet future. Yet the past spoke much more loudly from the journal's pages; its publications brought back the "accursed questions" that had preoccupied the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia that had—apparently—not been solved by the revolution. Ivan Denisovich, a character in an Aleksander Solzhenitsyn novel—made one think of the collectivization and the GULag, but also of the long-standing features of the Russian national character. The novel was also a thinly-veiled criticism of the intelligentsia. Attempts by *Novy Mir* and other journals to resuscitate the primacy of literature revealed the irreparable damage that had been done to it—and to culture in general—by decades of post-revolutionary party–state ideology. "Sincerity", instead of nourishing democratic idealism, opened any number of closets filled with skeletons.

The proliferation of informal groups (*kompanii*) of friends and colleagues became the most natural way of liberation of the Thaw intelligentsia could escape from the totality of party control and gain protection from the dangers of mistrust, atomization, and dystopia. From the beginning, the *kompanii* were professionally heterogenous: physicists encountered novelists, poets, and artists; university professors and people in the liberal arts met physicians and lawyers; intelligent educated men met intelligent educated women, etc. Friendship itself, as sociologist Vladimir Shlapentokh aptly defined it, became the substitute for the absent structures of civil society and private economy.[7] It is difficult to speak about a specific ideology among the liberal-minded members of these *kompanii*. The ethical pivot was an appreciation of high culture (music, fine arts, bard songs, etc.) and humor without cynicism, what Milan Kundera would immortalize in his *Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Still there was a set of values that one can loosely call "socialism with a human face". It was powerfully shaped by Marxism–Leninism and based on the concept of "scientific materialism", but could be combined with other forms of modernity. The members of *kompanii* identified trust and confidence as the signal virtues. Another prominent value was belief in *logos*, rationality and "truth" expressed in words.

From their predecessors, the revolutionary democratic intellectuals, the Thaw intelligentsia inherited other premises. The first was that authoritarian power was

Lipovetsky, "The Poetics of the ITR Discourse: In the 1960s and Today", *Ab Imperio* 1, 2013.

[7] Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Strakh i druzhba v nashem totalitarnom proshlom* (St. Petersburg: Zvezda, 2003).

based on ignorance and lies; truth and transparency (*glasnost*) would shatter this power. Another was that Russian culture was an antidote to Russian nationalism and education, science and rationality would eventually defeat anti-Semitism and national hatreds. The Thaw liberal-minded intelligentsia developed hatred for despotism in any form and contempt for money. At the same time, Western capitalism and liberal-democratic forms, with their structured chaos and lack of "methodology" were viewed as inappropriate for the Soviet Union; this would have meant a historical setback, denial of the revolution, and "a return" to outdated practices and institutions. Rationalism and methodology was for the leading Soviet liberal-minded thinkers of the 1960s, a replacement for ideology.[8]

The members of the *kompanii* often lived in austere conditions, yet they were proud of their equality and considered market capitalism to be an enemy, not a precondition for free and meaningful life. Ideally, the *kompanii* members would have translated their experience of informal and direct democracy to a national scale. State property should ideally belong to "working collectives" and, instead of a division of power there should be revival of "Soviets" as direct forms of democracy and governance. Most of these ideas were rather a reflection of a vague nostalgia for the revolutionary period before Stalin seized power; they did not result in systematic studies. There was little in this thinking that indicated a retreat from Leninist socialism toward liberalism, be it Western or Russian. Indeed, Thaw intellectuals had yet to encounter this liberalism in books, which remained hidden in secret sections of Soviet libraries. Direct democracy was still considered superior to liberal democracy, conceived as being in the interest of the "bourgeoisie" of the capitalist societies.

5.2 The Technical Intelligentsia Takes the Lead

The liberal concept of the Thaw intelligentsia had a rigid logic and was passionately shared by its many adherents, yet—like most utopias—it was profoundly contradictory. Not only would the dream of a Hegelian *Aufhebung*—the surpassing and overcoming of the troubled past—prove to be impossible, due to the resilience of the subject. The "totalitarian" Soviet bureaucracy also seemed to hard dislodge or even change. The state bureaucracy controlled economic assets and all sources of subsistence. The people of the intelligentsia, whatever their ambitions, remained a salaried class, and received state-controlled privileges in exchange for demonstrations of loyalty; their status in the hierarchy and state patronage defined the amount of privileges. All publishing houses, theaters, movie production studios, artistic schools, universities and scientific labs belonged to the state and controlled by the ubiquitous party committees and censors. Intellectually, liberal-minded members of the intelligentsia dreamed of assuming the form of the Hegelian Spirit that would

[8] See Ilya Kukulin, "Alternativnoie sotsialnoie proiektirovaniie v sovetskom obshchestve 1960–1970-kh godov", *Novoie literaturnoie obozrenie* 88, 2007, pp. 169–201.

"negate" the ignorant and reactionary bureaucrats. The most prudent of them believed that it was necessary to cultivate a union with enlightened *apparatchiks*, a distinct minority in the Soviet party–state. The most idealistic and impatient of them, however, were less pragmatic than even Hegel himself. Instead of looking for patrons, these Soviet free-thinkers wanted to be the Spirit that would destroy and supplant the bureaucracy.

In a recent discussion about the Soviet intelligentsia, the literary scholar Mark Lipovetsky has suggested that the discourse of technical-scientific intelligentsia "shaped the cultural mainstream of the late Soviet and post-Soviet liberalism".[9] This discourse was different from the contemporary Western liberal thought and old Russian liberalism. In the binary of Dudintsev's novel, the bureaucrats, careerists, and hacks constituted the "other" for Soviet scientists, engineers, intellectuals, and artists. The Cold War—above all the nuclear arms race—provided a strong focus, contrasting with the messy business of international relations. Nuclear stand-off was a matter too important to be entrusted to politicians; it required the primacy of experts and thinkers. In his writings from 1966–1968, Sakharov concluded that the survival of humankind required solidarity among the intelligentsia of the West and the East against their respective bureaucracies and military–industrial complexes, the forces that put their own interests ahead of progress: "International affairs must be completely permeated with scientific methodology". Sakharov believed that the intelligentsia could win primacy through "scientific–democratic" reforms and the introduction of freedom of information, travel, and speech.[10] In fact, the bubble of Soviet isolationism—virtually complete for people like Sakharov—was a necessary condition for the remarkable cohesion and certainty of the liberal-minded ethos of the Soviet intelligentsia. Soviet scientists and the "technical intelligentsia" as a whole based their liberal ideas mostly on their reading of Western journals and liberal, progressivist literature. *Samizdat* and *Tamizdat*—essays and discussions published either underground or abroad behind the back of Soviet officials—as well as limited access to special secret sections of Soviet libraries produced bookish knowledge. Yet the real, lived experience was missing. Most Soviet intellectuals never traveled outside the Soviet Union and did not have the possibility to live abroad. Their vision was one of secret scientific labs and privileged, Soviet-style gated communities.

Several factors helped the acceptance of liberal messages by the intelligentsia of the 1960s. These included: a faith in *logos* and culture as the force that would prevail over all forms of obscurantism, ignorance, and religion; embrace of the European Enlightenment as a foundation of scientific revolution; preference for the "scientific method" over bureaucratic coercion and ideological campaigns; a progressivist mentality that looked into the future with optimism; a deeply-held internationalism that combined the communist "scientific" conviction that nationalities

[9] Lipovetsky, "The Poetics of the ITR discourse", p. 116.

[10] Zubok, "Zhivago's Children", pp. 285–286. See also Andrei Sakharov, *Progress, Coexistence and Intellectual Freedom*, Sakharov Center (http://www.sakharov-center.ru/asfconf2011/english/articleseng/1).

would eventually fade out and the transnational nature of scientific discoveries; and, finally, intellectual defiance of hierarchy and respect for individual uniqueness, diversity, and reputation. The relatively high percentage of assimilated Jews in the privileged labs of the military–industrial complex (as designers of Soviet nuclear weapons, in applied mathematics, etc.) and the social mingling between science, arts, and humanities via *kompanii*, added to the liberal-minded spirit of scientific-technical communities across the Soviet Union.

In a paradox of history, the extremism of the Soviet party–state and the Cold War divide, Soviet isolationism, and Soviet structures of life and experience made the emergence and survival of a liberal concept within the Soviet intelligentsia possible. Ironically, it was the reviled military–industrial complex and the patronage of "enlightened" party apparatchiks (along with some politicians, including Yuri Andropov and Leonid Brezhnev) that accounted for the remarkable growth and influence of the intelligentsia's social base.

5.3 The Watershed of 1968

The relationship between the liberalism of the Soviet intelligentsia and Western liberalism was neither linear nor one-sided. When Western journalists and other visitors of the Soviet Union discovered "Soviet liberals", they exaggerated the level of their opposition to the Soviet regime, gave Western spin to their motivation and highlighted the binary nature of their thinking. For many liberal-minded intellectuals in Moscow and Leningrad, where most encounters with foreigners took place, the West became the second important "other" for their utopian idealistic vision, a positive pole to the negative opposite of the Soviet bureaucracy. At the same time, for the liberal-minded people of the Thaw, and even more during the 1960s, the West was never a liberal idyll; it was a place where struggle between classes and the fight against "progress" and "reaction" proceeded much more freely and intensely than in the Soviet Union. Representatives of the "progressive camp", from European communists to social democrats, had much more credibility than "reactionaries", an extremely vague category that encompassed European conservatives and American Republicans. Crucially, the West also included some countries of the Soviet socialist bloc, particularly Poland and Czechoslovakia, whose cultural products (films, novels, journalism) were the main filter—but also the main translator—of Western experience and ideas. Much of what "happened" in Western democratic countries, came to be digested by the Soviet intellectuals via Polish interpretations.

Not all Soviet liberal-minded intellectuals were Westernizers, but most of them gravitated in this direction quite naturally. As is often the case, they borrowed very selectively from the West, taking what matched their pre-existing beliefs and values. For a while, as Sakharov's writings of the 1960s testify, Soviet liberal Westernizers did not consider the West as an opposite of the Soviet experiment, but rather a cousin, with whom reconciliation was possible and, indeed, necessary. The filters and limitations on the reception of Western influences were considerable; neither

classic liberalism nor the "New Left" really made it into the Soviet intellectual milieu. For Soviet intellectuals, the classic Western liberalism defended by Friedrich von Hayek and Ludwig von Mises was "reactionary", and also conditioned by the Cold War rivalry. Most crucially, it did not admit the possibility of a historical compromise between the socialist East and the capitalist West. And the "New Left" movement, rising at the end of the 1960s in Western democracies, remained absolutely alien to the beliefs and values of the liberal-minded intelligentsia. The idea of unlimited individual freedom, especially sexual and identity experimentation, did not appeal to the socialist members of the *kompanii*.[11]

At the same time, the reaction of Soviet intellectuals to the events in Paris of May 1968 constituted an important milestone: after many years imagining a romantic, revolutionary experience, the Soviet liberal-minded intelligentsia began to reject violence and chaos that accompany a revolution. The rejection of the Western "New Left" paralleled the renunciation of the Cultural revolution in China. To their credit, Soviet intellectuals understood better than their Western counterparts that behind the radical youth in China stood ruthless manipulators, who would bring only more tyranny, not increased freedom. In just 15 years following Stalin's death, the concluding theme of the Soviet intelligentsia shifted irrevocably, against a revolution to one of reform. This shift was in fact reflected much earlier, in 1965, in the documentary of the cult filmmaker Mikhail Romm which drew connections between revolutionary frenzy and Nazi dictatorship.

1968 served to confirm the liberalism of the Soviet intelligentsia, yet prompted a crushing moral and intellectual crisis within it. The "Prague Spring" in April-August matched the utopian liberal concept perfectly. The removal of communist censorship and the Czech *glasnost*, public and free discussion of all social ills, captivated attention. But few paid attention to the economic projects of the communist reformers, and those were never implemented. Tvardovsky was one of thousands who felt he could have signed the "Two Thousand Worlds", the declaration of the Czech reformers.[12] Inside the party apparatus, the center of real power, enlightened apparatchiks battled openly against Cold Warriors, who believed that the order in Czechoslovakia must be restored by tanks. The Soviet occupation that killed the Czech reforms was a huge blow to the dreams and expectations of the liberal-minded intelligentsia. The myth of a socially engaged and morally superior intelligentsia collapsed as well. Only a handful of "human rights defenders" dared to protest openly in Moscow's Red Square; thousands drowned their outrage and impotence in alcohol and work. They were not prepared to sacrifice for the cause, as their predecessors—the Russian Decembrists, the terrorists of the People's Will and others—had been. While conformist themselves, they raged against obedient Soviet majority that cared for neither political—nor intellectual and artistic—freedom.

After 1968, the very word "reform" became taboo in the official Soviet discourse for almost two decades. The anti-intellectual trend in the ruling apparatus gained

[11] Zubok, "Zhivago's Children", p. 282–283.

[12] Alexander Tvardovsky's entry in his diary for 10 August 1968. See: Alexander Tvardovsky, "Rabochie tetradi", *Znamia* 9, 2003, pp. 142–143.

ground. Liberalization could continue only in highly specialized institutions, such as Moscow's Institute for World Economy and International Relations, Leningrad's Institute of Physics, and the Novosibirsk branch of the Soviet Academy of Sciences—sometimes referred to as "oases of freedom"—as well as in the cultural underground. The Soviet intelligentsia in Moscow, Leningrad, and other major centers of culture and the military–industrial complex lived through the 1970s in a complex dance of disunity and search for identity, vaguely mirroring the similar processes in the democratic societies of the West. Many old *kompanii* fell out, as people pursued new fads and cultural inclinations. The very idea of liberalism detached itself from the Soviet project.

There were several exit ramps in the exodus from utopia. One was professional escapism into "real science" and "real scholarship", within the confines of the official academies, institutions and labs. Another was an ethical sectarianism, going in for religious experience. There was also a heroic ethic exodus, which saw people form a new kind of *kompanii* where they consciously sought to live their ideals in the unfree society—they were called dissidents. Another massive and popular form of exodus was immigration, suddenly available with the beginning of East–West détente. Because the emigres were supposed to go to Israel, this was known, officially and unofficially, as "Jewish" immigration. In reality it affected the core of the base of the Thaw activists and the liberal intelligentsia. As many assimilated Soviet Jews defected from the communist project that their parents had built and defended, they began to compare the Soviet Union to Nazi Germany, casting the Soviet system as reactionary and irreformable. It was then logical for them to emigrate and raise their children in other societies.

Andrei Sakharov began to distance himself from his technocratic utopia; his wife, Yelena Bonner, who joined the party in expectation of reforming it from within, became an anti-Soviet dissident. Hundreds of thousands of others did the same. In 1970, the mathematician and writer Vladimir Kormer wrote a blistering article about the "doublethink" of the intelligentsia, likely influenced by Orwell. Kormer essentialized the notion of the intelligentsia as a part of Russian socio–cultural path dependency. The intelligentsia, he wrote, continued to fall into the same temptations of revolutionary change, the inevitability of socialism, the induction of the rule of law from above, the patriotic unity of the people during war and adversity, an inevitably bright future, technocratic rationality and faith in the Enlightenment. The people of the intelligentsia were not only incapable of replacing the despotic regime, they lived in "symbiosis" with it, maintaining its existence while dreaming of its collapse.[13] These criticisms, ahistorical and schematic as they were, were aimed at Soviet liberal-minded idealism. Solzhenitsyn, influenced by Kormer's article, organized a conservative nationalist attack on the liberal-minded people of the 1960s, calling them "smatterers", and denouncing their erroneous Westernism, their alienation from the "organic" foundations of Russian history and culture and their moral cowardice.

[13] Vladimir Kormer, *Dvoinoe soznanie intelligentsii i psevdokul'tura* (Moskva: Traditsya, 1997).

In fact, quite a few brave scholars, scientists, engineers and writers took considerable risks to help Solzhenitsyn, and other people who incurred the wrath of party–state officials and were harassed by the KGB. In the first half of the 1970s, Moscow—and to a lesser extent Leningrad—had sizable networks of people, who sought to find a middle-ground between dissent and emigration, who listened regularly to Western radio, shared *Samizdat* and *Tamizdat* literature, and sought to preserve the ethos of the old *kompanii*. Still, those who had dreamed of walking out of step 10 years prior had become family people, burdened with various duties and commitments. And the focus of conversations and activities of the aging Thaw intelligentsia shifted from an optimistic expectation of direct democracy for all to encapsulation and protection of their own milieu. There were also new conservative features in this milieu: repugnance toward mass politics and radicalization and alienation from the working class and the peasantry. While in the non-Russian republics of the Soviet Union many intellectual espoused cultural nationalism, Russian nationalists never developed a hegemonic position within the educated strata of ethnic Russians. Along with assimilated Jews, most ethnic Russian intellectuals equaled nationalism with "Russian fascism".

The last visible echo of the vibrant liberal-minded movement of the 1960s was the creation of Helsinki groups in 1976–1977 by people who called themselves "human rights defenders".[14] In a short while, the KGB arrested most of them and forced others to emigrate. Their sympathizers were "prophylactized"—that is to say, warned about the dire consequences of dissent—and ended up with their tail between the legs. Sakharov's utopian concept of a free intelligentsia turned out to pipe-dream. With a typical aberration of intellectuals, the tamed Soviet free-thinkers began to blame the "Russian slave mentality", the raw material that had supposedly thwarted implementation of their liberal designs. Intellectuals with Jewish background were among the first to turn against their homeland. They agreed among themselves that Soviet population, above all the Russian majority, would be never ready for freedom; they were not victims of the ruthless bureaucracy, but the foundation of bureaucratic order. Logically, revolutionary democracy, Marxism–Leninism, and the understanding of history as a struggle for liberation of the lower classes became casualties of disillusioned intellectuals. In 1980, one historian wrote in his diary that 63 years of Soviet totalitarianism had only made the Russian people more aggressive and illiberal. Totalitarianism, he added, was a deeply-rooted "Russian" phenomenon.[15] The old Russian intelligentsia had claimed to represent the people against the Tsarist regime. The Thaw intelligentsia hoped to educate and lead the people toward an enlightened socialism. In the 1970s, most Moscow intellectuals gave up on this vanguard role. The writers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky reflected this evolution best in their novels. In one of their science-fiction stories they featured "progressors", messengers from a superior civilization, who sought to change history and the fate of the dark masses. The result was catastrophic failure:

[14] On this movement, see Benjamin Nathans, "The Dictatorship of Reason: Aleksandr Vol'pin and the Idea of Rights under Developed Socialism", *Slavic Review* 66, no. 4, 2007, pp. 630–663.

[15] Zubok, "The Idea of Russia", p. 118.

"progressors" could barely escape themselves from the all-devouring dark hole of obscurantism, bigotry and violence. The metaphor was clear: the free-thinking intelligentsia had to hold together or perish in the dark sea of Soviet society.

5.4 The Last "Progressor": Gorbachev

By 1985 the liberal utopia of the Soviet intelligentsia was in crisis, overwhelmed by growing corruption, cynicism, historical pessimism, and conservative nationalism. Then came Mikhail Gorbachev, an uncannily ideal person for this utopia. He believed in *logos*, reason, and reform. He opposed aggressive nationalism and was (with several painful exceptions) against the use of force. He wanted to the rule of law and consensus. He was anti-authoritarian by nature and looked down at bureaucracy; he abhorred the terrible Soviet past but was an incorrigible optimist who continued to believe in the bright future of "socialist choice". Gorbachev felt comfortable in the West and among Westerners; he wanted to dismantle the Cold War and open the country to world.[16]

Gorbachev reached out to many cultural and intellectual figures of the 1960s, including Andrei Sakharov, a prominent liberal hero, with an appeal to help his perestroika. In 1987–1988, glasnost flourished, and cracks began to appear in the regime of state censorship. The time for Soviet intellectuals suddenly went back to 1968 and then rushed forward with tremendous acceleration. The main communist newspapers and journals began to criticize bureaucrats and lionize intelligentsia as a vanguard of perestroika and glasnost. Both "physicists" and "lyricists" experienced a heady return to the utopian enthusiasm, only this time with many more rights and freedoms. Just a couple of years after the Soviet authorities and the KGB had crushed the dissident movement of human rights defenders, Gorbachev granted to the liberal intelligentsia the freedoms they had coveted for decades: glasnost, the ability to form discussion groups and associations and freedom of conscience. They were also accorded the status of being "perestroika's vanguard", the group that would prepare the rest of Soviet people for liberalization. Gorbachev's wife, Raisa, became a patron and a member of the Soviet Cultural Foundation, an organization fully funded by the state, that supported any cultural projects intellectuals could dream of. Writers and journalists, all people of letters and ideas, had a brief "golden age": the circulation of literary journals surged to many millions, all their expenses paid from the state budget. Eminent scientists, writers, artists and even musicians and actors accompanied Gorbachev on his foreign trips and reform-minded journalists helped to dismantle the Soviet ideological orthodoxy with an avalanche of glasnost publications. They also helped to deconstruct the Soviet "enemy image", by

[16] On Gorbachev and his connection to the cultural and liberalizing trends of the early periods, see Robert English, *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); William Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017).

appealing to Western liberal audiences with messages of a nuclear-free world and "common European home".

This charmed time, however, did not last long. Perestroika foundered, then collapsed like a house of cards. Everything began with the ill-conceived economic reforms of 1987–1988. The hallmark of those reforms was erosion of the state's economic monopoly and devolution of controls for resources and profits from the state budget to the empowered "working collectives" of state enterprises (the units of the state economy), as well as to the NEP-like private sector of "cooperatives" and "banks". In 1988, Gorbachev removed the party apparatus from the management of economic processes; industrial ministries began to turn into de facto state corporations. Apparently both Gorbachev and his economists were inspired to put the economic agenda of the Prague Spring of 1968 into practice. The unintended outcome was ever-accelerating problems with availability of consumer goods, a growing budget deficit, and ultimately a financial and economic crisis of the Soviet system writ large. In reaction to this crisis, in 1989 Gorbachev accelerated political liberalization; the Soviet Union had the first semi-free elections ever held in a communist country. The combination of suboptimal economic reforms and political liberalism immediately destabilized the Soviet Union and unleashed the forces of separatism, which ultimately went out of Gorbachev's (or anyone else's) control.[17]

During these remarkable years, the concept of intelligentsia remained one of the pillars of Gorbachev's reforms, and the liberal-minded Soviet intellectuals were his political allies both inside and outside the communist party. The Congress of People's Deputies, and its upper house counterpart, the Supreme Soviet, became the institutions where hundreds of scientists, scholars, journalists, writers, and other intellectuals could express their views freely and choose their political orientation. The new environment of ideological and political freedom, however, produced a surprising effect: the concept of intelligentsia, which combined freedom and socialism, transformed into a radical anti-communist politics aimed at complete destruction of socialist foundations and the state itself. In this new politics, the tropes and beliefs of the old intelligentsia fractured and changed beyond all recognition.

An important historical flash-back is required at this point. Earlier, the same transformation had happened to Soviet emigres in the West. Thousands of intellectuals from Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev and other cities became disillusioned with the Soviet project had been forced by the KGB to emigrate during the 1970s. For many educated ex-Soviet emigres, who ended up in the United States and Israel, the intelligentsia of the 1960s remained a key social and cultural model. Many of them hoped to recreate the liberal world of *kompanii* and dissident circles, opening literary journals and convening conferences. Yet they soon found both worlds evaporating before their eyes: the imagined West and the milieu of intelligentsia. The realities

[17] Steven L. Solnick, *Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse 1970–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Rudolf G. Pikhoia, "Vlast. Nomenklatura. Sobstvennost. Ob odnoi iz prichin raspada SSSR", in *Zapiski Arkheografa* (Moskva: Universitet Dmitriia Pozharskogo, 2016), pp. 384–400.

of the market economy and free choice killed the idea of a transplanting the intelligentsia abroad. The factional and ideological divisions camouflaged at home by Soviet structures of life and a common opposition to the regime came to the surface in the West. Writer Vasily Aksenov admitted that life in the West "unwittingly did more to undo the dissident movement than the KGB".[18] He could have said the same about the main notions of intelligentsia. Ironically enough, the educated Russian emigres in the United States and Israel found their home on the right wing of the democratic political spectrum and brooked no sympathy with Western liberalism.

In retrospect, some argue that Chinese-style authoritarianism and reforms would have spared the shattering and often tragic experience of Soviet disintegration. Many more claim that the Soviet Union had always been doomed and its relatively peaceful dissolution was the best of all realistic alternatives. There are, of course, many reasons why the Chinese way (or any authoritarian way) of Soviet transformation would not have worked out.[19] The structures of Soviet society, and in particularly the role of intelligentsia should be singled out. Much of the baggage of ideas, notions, and experience of the Soviet intelligentsia proved to be inadequate and insufficient for constructive and productive reforms. The most articulate and free-thinking groups of Soviet society assumed that the state and bureaucracies were the problem, not the tool for reforms. In fact, during perestroika, the most vocal and active segments of Soviet intelligentsia stood against Chinese-style authoritarian reforms, and in favor of liberalization, devolution of the party–state controls, and empowerment of the cultural and scientific elites. In a major paradox, during the earlier phases of glasnost and perestroika, Soviet journalists, scientists of the military–industrial complex, artists, and other members of intelligentsia assumed that they could have their freedoms while keeping guaranteed state funding. The symbiotic relationship between the intelligentsia and the authoritarian state, noted by Kormer, reversed itself in the politics of perestroika. The intellectuals wanted liberalization from and destruction of the state yet did not see that this would make them exposed to the unforgiving forces of mass politics and the market.

The main strength of the intelligentsia, the creation of cultural and intellectual structures and public discourses, should be reconsidered in the light of what we have learned about the destructive reforms of Gorbachev. Many scholars, following Alexei Yurchak, concluded that the change of "discursive practices" during Gorbachev's glasnost led to an abrupt crumbling of the ossified "dominant discourse" of "real" Soviet socialism, which resulted in the collapse of the Soviet system and state. "It was forever until it was no more", concludes Yurchak and his followers.[20] Of course, the sudden ideological vacuum destabilized Soviet society,

[18] Vasily Akesenov, "Novyy sladostnyy stil'", *Znamia* 5, 1997, p. 152.

[19] For discussion of the reformability of the Soviet system, see Stephen F. Cohen, "Was the Soviet System Reformable?", *Slavic Review* 63, no. 3, 2004, pp. 459–488; Vladislav Zubok, "The Soviet Union and China in the 1980s: Reconciliation and Divorce", *Cold War History* 17, no. 2, Spring 2017, pp. 121–141.

[20] Alexei Yurchak, "Soviet Hegemony of Forms: Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, no. 3, 2003, pp. 480–510; Alexei Yurchak,

paralyzing the party functionaries and repressive structures, while empowering nationalist movements. Yet how can one explain why other, non-official forms of socialist discourse floundered so quickly in 1989–1991, giving way to a radical, quasi-liberal anti-communism?

Some authors theorized that, in contrast to intellectuals who demanded socialism with a human face, other groups in Soviet society, linked to state ownership and production, shifted to a capitalist agenda in order to translate their political control into ownership. Others, less socially deterministic authors, speak about neoliberal Bolshevism, which pushed aside the dream of a mixed economy, ideas of direct democracy, and the rest of the agenda of the 1960s intelligentsia.[21] Other scholars attribute the radical transformation of perestroika politics to glasnost and the fall of the Iron Curtain. True, Soviet controls on travel and exchange collapsed in 1988–1989, and thousands of Soviet intellectuals were able to go abroad and participate in numerous conference, seminars and training workshops. Almost always their hosts were Western, especially American, NGOs with a very explicit agenda of "democratization" and economic neoliberalism.

Other sources, including biographies of the new public and political activists of 1989–1991 (among them, Yeltsin's advisers and activists of the Democratic Russian movement and many nationalists in the non-Russian republics) demonstrate that these people, who had earlier shared the agenda of socialism with a human face, shifted overnight to anti-communism. This occurred under the impact of a Western consumerist shock, which had a transformative effect equal to—or even more important than—the transfer of Western ideas of liberal democracy. In fact, the manifest superiority of the Western economy and societies proved the correctness of Western ideas in the eyes of those who had earlier adhered to the Soviet-made reformist agenda.

While the cumulative effect of all these causes cannot be denied, their impact on the intelligentsia's reorientation was not so clear or linear. What played a huge role was the economic and financial crisis produced by earlier Gorbachev reforms and the absolute misunderstanding of the sources of this crisis among reform-minded Soviet intellectuals, including economists. Those people never recognized that the reforms of 1987–1988 were the main cause of the desperate economic situation later on. Instead, they (and Gorbachev along with them) blamed the problems on the resistance of the Soviet bureaucracy, the old enemy. The binary of innovators versus bureaucrats led Soviet analysts astray—the deeper the economic problems and consumer dissatisfaction became, the more they concluded that the entire old party–state system should be dismantled. In ideological terms, it was now a struggle

Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[21] See David Kotz and Fred Weir, *Revolution from Above: The Demise of the Soviet System* (London–New York: Routledge, 1997); Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinsky, *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms: Market Bolshevism Against Democracy* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001), Steven Kotkin and Jan Gross, *Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of Communist Establishment* (New York: Modern Library, 2010).

against "totalitarianism" to the end, until the full destruction of all forms of Soviet life. It was another example of the idealistic mentality of Soviet intellectuals. This was a long-sought act of rebellion against the Soviet party–state, the Hegelian "negation" of it.

The "democratic revolution" of 1989–1991 was the greatest political act of the Soviet intelligentsia. Its energy helped to mobilize masses of disgruntled Soviet consumers, elect new representative political assemblies bent on radical change, delegitimize and undermine the authoritarian party and state structures. At several crucial junctions, contrary to dominant expectations and fears in the West and among the intelligentsia itself, the ideas and penchants of liberalization and direct democracy prevailed over authoritarian and national-imperial forces and ideas. In 1990, a liberal-democratic coalition helped Russia to declare "national sovereignty", followed by all other Soviet republics. In August 1991, thousands of Muscovites, driven by the same spirit, blocked a poorly-prepared, reactionary coup.

Now, instead of a leap into an ideal socialist future, the radicalized intelligentsia groups wanted to take a giant leap directly into a "civilized" market, the newly-recognized source of all social goods, and into Western liberal democracy. When Gorbachev in the fall of 1990 refused to take this leap, embodied in the "500 days" program, swathes of Moscow intelligentsia turned viciously against the Soviet reformer. The diaries of Gorbachev's adviser, Anatoly Chernyaev, are filled with jeremiads against the "democratic intelligentsia" and its lack of common sense and elementary gratitude to Gorbachev.[22] Ignored were a few voices who cautioned against such radicalism and warned that an application of American-style libertarianism would be disastrously costly for Soviet society and might actually lead back to authoritarianism.

The behavior of the Soviet intelligentsia at this historical juncture deserves more systematic analysis, but even a brief outlook of its generational trajectory and profile suggests possible answers. Many radicalized intellectuals, who formed a nucleus of political advisers of Boris Yeltsin in 1991, felt liberated from the dualism of the past, and wanted to build "a new democratic Russia", based on Western-style liberal recipes, as opposed to the "fascist Russia" of their nationalist rivals. This was their new mission, which made them support Boris Yeltsin against Gorbachev's "center" and aligned them with nationalist-separatist forces in the Baltics, Georgia and Ukraine. The Russian nationalists, in the minority and marginalized by the political storm of 1989–1991, witnessed with horror at the destruction of the Soviet Union, and just like their predecessors had done many decades previously, blamed collapse of the old order on the liberal cosmopolitan intelligentsia.

Inebriated on the slogans of market liberalism, the radical intellectuals refused to put "two plus two" together. The majority of those who supported Yeltsin did not realize that they were participating in the rapid dismantling of the Soviet Union. They acted on the belief that the old totalitarian statehood had to be destroyed at any cost. After that, they imagined, new democratic institutions and transition to a

[22] Anatoly Chernyaev, *Sovmestnyi iskhod. Dnevnik dvukh epoch. 1972–1991 gody* (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2008), pp. 887, 891, 919.

market economy would quickly fix the endemic problems of the post-Soviet polity and economy. The Western economist Michael Ellman was astonished in 1990 to see tens of thousands of people from the institutes of Academy of Science and the military–industrial complex marching in support of market liberalism. All of a sudden, this was a new utopia of capitalist prosperity and emancipation, which replaced socialism with a human face. Ellman called those people "the turkey that celebrated Thanksgiving".[23] The vast majority of these people would lose their status, jobs and livelihoods within a couple of years.

The intelligentsia and its liberalizing, transformative role in Soviet society can be considered as collateral damage of the collapse of 1989–1991. The old Soviet elites melted and morphed, different social groups emerged; the tandem of power and money replaced the ideocratic state and culture-centric Soviet civilization. Some idealists, in Russia and abroad, lashed out at those from the old intelligentsia who succumbed to the temptations of power and riches. This criticism, however, misses the main point: the conditions and structures that had made the Soviet intelligentsia possible were no longer around. Even in Western democracies, the classic ideas of liberalism—the child of the Enlightenment and experience—had been replaced by the politics of identity, economic neoliberalism (inimical not only to socialism but to any socially-conscious "embedded" liberal thinking) and mass culture. Almost immediately, younger professionals and intellectuals in the post-Soviet republics began to push their predecessors to the sidelines of history, blaming them for all kinds of sins, from impractical idealism and ideological dogmatism to subversive anti-statism.[24] All attempts by prominent cultural figures, with the support of the Russian state, to convene "congresses of intelligentsia" and develop liberal parties on this basis failed miserably, just like the previous attempts among the emigres in the West. As it turned out, the disappearance of the liberal-minded intelligentsia in Russia was a huge blow to the potential of liberal democracy. The new Russian middle class, that emerged after the anarchic 1990s in Russia, did not become democratic and have readily rejected liberal concepts in favor of the authoritarian state, bureaucracy and a stable economic order.

The intelligentsia as an imagined community of free-thinking liberal-minded people proved a remarkably tenacious collective subject of late Soviet history. It represented an idealized place of memories and hopes—as opposed to the material world, with the oppressive dominance of an omnipotent and ever-present party–state and an obedient, if dissatisfied, population. This community and concept, however, did not survive the fall of Soviet communism and is not likely to be reborn in the new, money-oriented and authoritarian Russia.

[23] The author's conversation with Michael Ellman on 23 October 2017 in Berlin.

[24] See among many sources on this Arkady Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia: The Journey from Gorbachev's Freedom to Putin's War* (London: Atlantic Books, 2015).

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