

# **Romans into Italians: Russian National Identity in Transition<sup>1</sup>**

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Что это за  
отечество  
у забывших об нации?  
Какая нация у вас?  
Коминтерина?

.....

пол-отечества мог бы  
снести,  
а пол --  
отстроить, умыв. . . .  
Вл. Маяковский, *Хорошо!*

Союз нерушимый, республик свободных  
Навеки сплотила великая 'усь.  
From an old Soviet National Anthem

New words have been coined; and even the old ones are used in a new sense; they have undergone a new change of meaning. This change of meaning depends upon the fact that those words which formerly were used in a descriptive, logical or semantic sense, are

Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*. p. 283

Народ, он делится на ненарод  
И на народ в буквальном смысле  
Кто ненарод -- не то чтобы урод  
Но он -- ублюдок, в высшем смысле.

А кто народ -- не то, чтобы народ  
Но он народа выраженье  
Что не укажешь точно -- вот народ  
Но скажешь точно: есть народ! И точка.

Д. А. Пригов (*Зеркала. Альманах. 1989*, 1  
[Московский рабочий, 1989])

## I. Introduction

What follows are observations on the problem of national identity nomenclature, which were prompted by the debates around the issue of Russian nationalism and national identity which exploded on the Russian scene in 1988-1989<sup>2</sup> and have since then continued to influence the thinking of the educated Russians. Although I do not intend to challenge or concentrate on any particular statement on the subject, I must acknowledge that my thinking was especially stimulated by a series of debates in the *Literary gazette* in 1989 (especially those between Lev Anninskii and Oleg Mikhailov, Vadim Kozhinov and Benedict Sarnov, published under the rubric, "The Dialogues of the Week"<sup>3</sup>), essays by Tatiana Glushkova in *Our Contemporary*,<sup>4</sup> Igor Shefarevich's publications in *Novyi mir*, *Our Contemporary*, and *Literary Russia*,<sup>5</sup> Anatolii Lanshchikov's "Exiting the Dead End Street,"<sup>6</sup> and transcripts of the meetings of the RSFSR Writers Union,<sup>7</sup> among others. My aim was to contribute to the establishment of a framework for sorting out several issues, all associated with modernism, or better, modernity, that are pivotal in the debates on Russian nationalism: (1) modern Russian history, including the revolution as a context in the evolution of Russian identity; (2) the role of Soviet Russian literary culture and institutions in forming the concepts of the

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<sup>2</sup>This essay (quite literary, an attempt) is part of a larger project: a study of the relationship between authorship, literary authorship primarily, and citizenship, political, cultural and social, in Russia's confrontation with modernity. See my "Authorship and Citizenship," *Stanford Slavic Studies* 1 (Stanford, 1987), and "The Writer Meets the State," in *The Gorbachev Era*, eds. A. Dallin and C. Rice (Stanford, 1986).

<sup>3</sup>Lev Anninskii-Oleg Mikhailov, "Imena i psevdonimy," *Literaturnaia gazeta* 43 (November 25, 1989). For the summary of the "dialogues," see "Dialogi nedeli: Itogi goda," *Literaturnaia gazeta* 1 (January 3, 1990). Among the essays of that year that set the tone for the general discussion is one by Marietta Chudakova, "V poiskakh utrachennogo otechestva," *Literaturnaia gazeta* 38 (September 20, 1989):20.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., "O 'russkosti,' o schast'i, o svobode," *Nash sovremennik* 7 and 9 (1989).

<sup>5</sup>Igor' Shafarevich, *Novyi mir* 8 (1989), "Russofobiiia," *Nash Sovremennik* 6 (1989); his "Fenomen emigratsii," *Literaturnaia Rossiia* 36 (September 8, 1989).

<sup>6</sup>*Literaturnaia Rossiia* 39 and 40 (1989).

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, "Stseny VI Plenuma pravleniia Soiuza pisatelei RSFSR 13-14 noiabria 1989 g.," *Ogonek* 48 (November, 1989):6-8,31. Much the same took place a few months later, at the Seventh Plenary Session of the Governing Board of the RSFSR Writers' Union (March, 1990).

nation and/or ethnicity; (3) the relation between the question of national identity and the changing institution of literary authorship. My goal, therefore, is to sketch out an historical context for the key concepts of Russian nationalism that are now undergoing, to echo Nietzsche, a wholesale transvaluation.

For it is clear now that the disintegration of the central institutions of the Stalinist-Brezhnevist state, brought about by the Gorbachev revolution, left the linguistic consciousness of the Russian-speaking population -- for the second time in this century -- without much support from objectifying institutions. The fate of the word "socialism" is a case in point. To borrow an image from Rozanov's *By the Walls of the Church*, the words of the Russian language or, better yet, their speakers, are desperately looking for something solid to lean against -- be that the wall of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Kremlin, the KGB, the peasant hut, the shopping mall, Armand Hammer's Trade Center, or the ghost of a conspiracy. The word, as a character in the eponymous novella by Tatiana Tolstaia, wanders about like a "Somnambula in a fog," and it will not rest until the fog dissipates and the map finally becomes a map of a real Russia.<sup>8</sup>

In ordinary times, with their well-established routines, the question what to lean against does not arise, except perhaps in the hallowed halls of the academy or the manuscript of philosophically-minded authors.<sup>9</sup> Today, when everybody is searching for answers, central concepts, only recently matter-of-factly transparent, have grown opaque and ambiguous. It is therefore more important than ever to understand that these same words had once leaned against different walls, carried different meanings and are now assuming new, unpredictable connotations.

As must be clear from my remarks, I identify with the "nominalist," rather than "realist" tradition in humanistic studies. The "realists" -- and this would include the materialists, dialectical and otherwise as well as proponents of racial theories<sup>10</sup> -- believe that signs have a necessary connection to what they designate (a version of Plato's ideal forms, "blue blood," etc., which remain themselves regardless of context). By contrast, for the nominalists (including the Kantian tradition whose essential premises I share), words as well as other signs are ultimately a matter of convention and convenience; they

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<sup>8</sup>*Novy mir* 4, (1990):8-25. That this image has become widely accepted as the metaphor for the country under the perestroika is indicated by an illustration in an issue of *Literary gazette* (May 16, 1990), showing a white silhouette of a man descending the sloping crenelations of the Kremlin wall -- against a black background. The drawing serves as an illustration to Fazil' Iskander's "Ballada o svobode."

<sup>9</sup>Edward Shils, "Center and Periphery," in his *The Constitution of Society* (Chicago, 1982).

<sup>10</sup>Joseph, Arthur, *Compte de Gobineau, Essai sur l'Inégalité des Races Humaines*, 1854.

are linked to the things and ideas to which they refer only by convention (Saussure's "arbitrariness of the sign").<sup>11</sup> I will not, therefore, be looking for any timeless, Platonic essences but a series of contexts that defined the compass of the uses of the relevant concepts in modern times.

My main focus, not surprisingly, is on the word *russkii*. As the title suggests, I am working under the premise that the Soviet Union stands at the threshold of transforming itself into a federation of regions, a federation that in fundamental ways will be discontinuous with the imperial and Soviet system of relations between the country's center and its periphery. Like other designations in the national vocabulary, the "Russians" -- the term for members of the Soviet Union's largest, most central "imagined community"<sup>12</sup> -- is a word in transition.<sup>13</sup> The walls of the Stalinist-Brezhnevist state, strong enough to sustain the words of the Soviet national anthem, are no longer in a condition that invites leaning. The walls of the new institutions as well as the new state, for the time being, can be found only in the sketch books of the cultural-political elite. Many of the more articulate members of this elite happen to belong to the Writers' Union, a fact that suggests a crucial connection between *belles lettres* and the discourse of national identity.

## II. History/Theory/Terminology

Matters were relatively simple when to be Russian meant to have been baptized in the Russian Orthodox Creed by the Church, the official church of the Russian Empire, as well as to desist from making a claim that one belonged to some other "nation," with its own, unrealized, claim to sovereignty (as in the case of the Orthodox Ukrainians, for example). The secular term was the *velikoross* or *velikoruss* (Great-Russian); *russkii* served as a colloquial abbreviation, but by having the *veliko* lobbed off, this colloquialism tended to downplay the official, state connotation in favor of one that was vaguely cultural and/or tribal-biological ("blood"). The term *velikoross* is not itself of

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<sup>11</sup>Etienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology*, chapters 2 ("Image Versus Text") and 3 ("Nature and Convention: Gombrich").

<sup>12</sup>Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, New York, 1983).

<sup>13</sup>This has been born out by the more recent developments. With the emergence of Russia as a "sovereign" republic and, finally, after the Russian Federation following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the term *rossiaianin* (significantly a noun, rather than an adjective) made its appearance (or, strictly speaking, a reappearance, given its currency in the late 18th- and early 19th-century Russia. Note added in September 1992.

Russian origin, but had been coined, some time before 1347, in the chanceries of another Empire, the Patriarchate of Constantinople, in order to draw a distinction between the Muscovite Russia, *Megale Rossia*, and *Micro Rossia*, roughly, the Ukraine.<sup>14</sup> With time, this originally value-neutral designation received a particular "objectification" in the Muscovite State, assuming the hierarchical connotation of the relationship between the metropolis and the other "Russias" of the periphery.<sup>15</sup> Because my horizons in this essay are circumscribed by the ideology of nationalism -- a secular, modern development -- a survey of the various transformations that the word *ruskii* has undergone since the earliest written records is out of place here.<sup>16</sup> Still, it would be instructive to recall that in its original usage, *ruskii* referred, not to the East Slavic tribes, but to the Scandinavians (the Greek *oi 'Ros*, the Normans<sup>17</sup>).

The ideology of nationalism, one of the secular worldviews which arose in Europe and the Americas during the Enlightenment, traces its most stimulating, original formulations to the writings of Herder (the concept of *Volkstum*) and Rousseau (*la patrie*) and did not begin to captivate European and American imagination until well into the eighteenth century.<sup>18</sup> In Russia proper, among the educated elite, the word received its most stable connotations in the historical conjuncture that brought together (1)

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<sup>14</sup>"Великороссия" in Макс Фасмер (Vassmer), *Этимологический словарь русского языка*. Пер. О. Н. Трубачева, тт. I-IV (М., 1964).

<sup>15</sup>Although the term was supposed to have lost its demeaning connotation after the revolution, Moscow's policy with regard to the Ukrainians has been consistent enough with the Imperial attitudes for the word still to rile the Ukrainians. See Борис Олейник, "Национальное достоинство и достояние," *Наш современник* 9, 1989.

<sup>16</sup>See Вячеслав Вс. Иванов, "О выборе веры в Восточной Европе," *Природа* 12 (1988):26-38. Д. С. Лихчев, "Крещение Руси и государство Русь," *Новый мир* 6 (1988): 249-258. For the Imperial period, see Hans Rogger, *National Consciousness in the Eighteenth-Century Russia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960). Nicholas Riasanovsky, *Nicholas I and official nationality in Russia, 1825-1855* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961). Edward C. Thaden, *Conservative Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1964).

<sup>17</sup>Vassmer, "Русский." In a similar way, the Franks gave their names to the peoples populating Brittany, Bourgoingy, etc. to transform them all -- thanks to the development of the absolute monarchy and printing by the seventeenth century -- into the French.

<sup>18</sup>Stromberg, *European Intellectual History since 1789* 2d ed. (Prentice Hall, 1975). Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and States: An Inquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism* (Boulder, Colorado, 1977). For an analysis of the Russian case, see Hans Rogger, *National Consciousness in the Eighteenth-Century Russia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960) and Marc Raeff, *Origins of the Russian Intelligentsia: The Eighteenth-Century Nobility* (New York, 1966), pp. 158-160). A helpful and brief review may be found in S.V. Utechin (Утехин), *Russian Political Thought: A Concise History* (New York, 1963). For an exhaustive, amply documented review see Mikhail Agursky, *The Third Rome: National Bolshevism in the USSR* (1987)

considerable achievements in Russian letters, including printing and broadly cultural and specifically linguistic scholarship; (2) the French Revolution, Napoleonic wars, and subsequent Russian victory over the French; (3) assimilation of the Western secular ideology of nationalism,<sup>19</sup> spurred in part by Peter Chaadaev's famous indictment of Russia's failure to join the "historical Europe," and, equally important, (4) adoption by the autocracy of Count S. Uvarov's theory of the Official Nationality.<sup>20</sup> Needless to say, before the establishment of the ideology of nationalism in such institutions as the Russian Academy of Sciences and Uvarov's Ministry of Education, nationalist ideas simply could not be thought.<sup>21</sup> Since that time, they have very much been thought -- inevitably within the framework of the ideology of nationalism. It is this ideology which has made it possible to *imagine* a native culture -- often, but not always, language based -- to claim for the people (*le peuple*) the sovereignty that had hitherto been thought of as the divine right of kings; and to use this idea of the people as the basis for a community politically realized in a modern state.<sup>22</sup> It might be added that the ideological framework of nationalism is itself articulated by these "imaginings" and stands in the same relationship to the varieties of nationalisms as an academic grammar of a modern tongue, to the varieties of actual speech.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, the current debate on Russian national identity, carried out within the ideological framework of nationalism, would have been practically incomprehensible in Russia prior to the Napoleonic Wars. These wars, and especially the invasion of Russia by the French army -- by then a patriotic and messianic army to boot -- were responsible for much of the Westernized Russian nobility's impulse to differentiate themselves from the invaders. Tolstoy captured this transformation brilliantly by beginning *War and*

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<sup>19</sup>Malia, Martin. *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism, 1812- 1855*. Cambridge, Mass., 1961. See also A. Walicki, *The Slavophile Controversy* (Oxford, 1975).

<sup>20</sup>Nicholas Riasanovsky, *Nicholas I and Official Nationality in Russia* (Berkeley, Calif., 1959); see also his *Parting of Ways: Government and the Educated Public in Russia, 1801-1855* (Oxford, 1976) and his *Russia and the West in the Teachings of the Slavophiles* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952).

<sup>21</sup>I therefore disagree with the author of, perhaps, the most thorough and imaginative study of Russian nationalist ideologies, Mikhail Agursky, where he refuses to draw a fundamental distinction between, on the one hand, the political ideologies of Muscovy and the Empire in the eighteenth century, and on the other, the nationalist ideologies of the post-Napoleonic Europe. Mikhail Agursky, *The Third Rome: National Bolshevism in the USSR*, pp. 6-9.

<sup>22</sup>Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Marc Raeff *The Origins of the Russian Intelligentsia*

<sup>23</sup>And while a diachronic description of such a "language" might locate a plethora of continuities with the predecessor languages, to the speakers today, the experienced reality is the discontinuity between the "ancient" and the "modern." Cf. Agursky, *The Third Rome*, pp. 6-9.

*Peace*, this most powerful document of Russian nationalism, with lengthy passages of spoken French. In the age when traffic in ideas was simplified by the technology of printing, book markets, and the cosmopolitan (i.e., French!) culture of European nobilities, this impulse for differentiation was articulated through the contemporary discourse best suited for such sentiments: the nationalist ideologies, with their emphasis on native history, native tongue, and the culture of the "natives," namely, rural folklore. Like the Germans before them, the Russian noblemen and noblewomen began to realize, and rather unhurriedly, that they were decidedly not French only after Russian soldiers engaged Napoleon's army.<sup>24</sup> Pushkin's famous lines from *Eugene Onegin*, "Until now, feminine love has not expressed itself in Russian," referred to the early 1820s, a good decade after the *Patriotic War* and only some twenty or so years after the appearance of the first Academy dictionary of the Russian language (to be followed by an official grammar in 1802, followed, incidentally, by a Ukrainian grammar a mere seventeen years later). One can only guess what would have happened to the female love if it had chosen to declare itself in French during Stalin's antic cosmopolitanism campaign launched three years after the end of the Great *Patriotic War*, some hundred and twenty years later. The meaning of the word *ruskii* apparently had undergone quite a change in that time.

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Dictionaries of the Russian language offer tangible evidence of this transformation. I will focus on two sets of relevant samples, culled from the two lexicographic masterpieces of Modern Russia, Vladimir Dal's *Tolkovyi slovar' velikorusskogo zhivogo iazyka* (the 1903-07 edition of the 1860s classic),<sup>25</sup> and D. N. Ushakov's *Tolkovyi slovar' russkogo iazyka*, compiled through the 1920s and 1930s and published in four volumes in 1939.

In Dal's *Dictionary*, the words "ruskii" and "Rus'" are defined as follows:

РУСКІЙ (РУССКІЙ) мороз, сильный -- ветер  
(низовс.) северный; арх. южный. -- сарафан, для  
отличия от московского [sic] [...] Здесь  
русским духом пахнет (сказоч.), людским,

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<sup>24</sup>For a discussion of this "shock," see Martin Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism*.

<sup>25</sup>I am using the 3d edition, ed. by I. A. Boduen-de-Kurtene, vol. 3 (Petersburg and Moscow, 1903-07). The first edition was published in 1863-67.

человечьим. *Не стерпело русское сердце*, из себя вышел; в драку пошел. *Русский ум -- задний ум*, запоздалый. *Русский Бог*, авось, небось, да как-нибудь. *Русский час*, невесть сколько. *Русское сухо: бреди по самое ухо! Русское спасибо.* Русская рубаха [...] *С ним порусски не сговоришь*, глуп или упрям. *Русским счотом*, толком, понятным счотом. (Встарь писали: *Правда Русская*; только Польша (?) прозвала нас *Россией, россиянами, российскими*, по правописанию латинскому, а мы переняли это, перенесли в кириллицу свою и пишем *русской!*) *Русской*, в значении сущ. м., крещоный, христианин. *Что ты, тварь, в русские не окрестился.* сиб. Опд.

РУСЬ: мир, бел-свет. *Совсем на Руси* (твр.) навиду, на открытом месте, на юру. *Все вывела на Русь*, распахнула душу, все высказала [см. *русак, русский, русеть, нерусь*; ср. *ружа*].

[*Russian*: frost, strong (about winds); northern (Siberiaan); (*arch.*) southern; Russian (as opposed to Muscovite) peasant dress [...]; ; (in fairy tales) smelling of Russians, i.e., smelling of humans; he could not contain his Russian heart, i.e., he lost his temper and started a fight; Russian mind, i.e. slow, delayed; Russian God, i.e., maybe, perhaps, let's hope; a Russian hour, i.e., nobody knows how long; Russian dry land, i.e., the water is deep; a Russian thank you; a Russian shirt [...]; he can't understand Russian, i.e., he is either stupid or stubborn; Russian calculus, i.e., clear calculus; [...] A Russian (as a noun), i.e., a Christian [...]]

[*Rus'*: the entire world; open to all Russia,  
i.e., standing in an open space, on a hill;  
showing all to Russia i.e., to be open, to tell  
all [...]]

Although by no means exhaustive, Dal' entries are supremely suggestive. To begin with, Dal' shows that the word "Russian" has a history, that is to say, it meant different things at different times in different places -- all depending on a particular context. Perhaps most striking is the absence of the usage of "Russian" as a term of exclusion (i.e., *velikoruss*). Even in such an expression as "it smells of Russians" (*rusским dukhom pakhnet*), Dal' sees *russkii* as a generic term for "human." It would seem, then, that Dal', who was Pushkin's contemporary, treated the poet's usage in his mock epic, *Ruslan and Liudmila* ("Here it smells of Russians, here it smells of Russia" as a case of a folk etymology: a homonymic play on *rus-skii*, *Rus'*, *rus-alka* (mermaid), *Rus-lan*, which echoed the exuberance of Russian pride after the defeat of Napoleon. Also quite unexpectedly, the attribute "Muscovite" could be opposed to "Russian" as an attribute designating a form of peasant dress. When viewed against a non-Christian background, "Russian" meant simply Christian; for people living in Siberia, "Russian" referred to the western, European part of the Empire; for the natives of the north, the Southern part.

Viewed against the background of the Imperial nationalities policy, which, despite Uvarov's valiant efforts, began to be carried out in earnest only in the reign of Alexander III,<sup>26</sup> "Russian" ("Great Russian," "Orthodox") implied certain privileges (in relation, say, to the Catholic Poles, or the lower-class Ukrainians, or the German-speaking Balts). These privileges included the ability to use one's "local" language in official affairs and education above the elementary grades and, perhaps even more important, career opportunities in the vast imperial administration.<sup>27</sup> "Russia, although often described as such," writes an American historian of the imperial nationalities

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<sup>26</sup>Seton-Watson, *Nations and States*, p. 87.

<sup>27</sup>In 1893, the University of Dorpat was closed down because classes were conducted in German, hitherto the language of state in the regions of the empire with the German-speaking nobility.

policy, echoing Peter Struve's conviction,<sup>28</sup> "was not, in fact a multinational empire in any but an ethnographic or statistical sense." He went on:

Its rulers and officials wished, as one of them put it, wished as a matter of course, for a homogeneity of the population. Their preference for treating a conglomerate of over one hundred ethnic groups, cultures, creeds, and tongues as an undifferentiated mass of subjects had frequently to yield to the reality of diversity. Yet the pursuit of administrative uniformity and centralized control, the conception of the empire as a unitary Russian rather than a multinational (and much less a federal) state were never abandoned.<sup>29</sup>

Apparently, this "official Nationality" policy had failed to imprint itself on the usage recorded by Dal' in the mid- 1860s. And while it did much to precipitate the Revolution of 1905, it still did not pass the test of common usage administered by the editorial team which brought out the third edition of the volume containing the entries under discussion in 1907.

By contrast with Dal's pre-revolutionary *Dictionary of the Great-Russian Living Language*, the 1939 *Tolkovyĭ slovar' russkogo iazyka* of D. N. Ushakov, published at the acme of high Stalinism, offers a verbal picture which would have warmed the hearts of advocates of the imperial Official Nationality and wholesale russification:

РУССКИЕ, Восточно-славянский народ, составляющий большинство населения СССР, великоруссы. Я -- русский, я люблю молчанье дали мразной. Фет.  
*Татьяна (русская душою, сама не зная почему) с ее холодною красою любила русскую зиму. Пушкин.*

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<sup>28</sup>Peter Struve thought that, unlike Austria-Hungary, Russia was a genuine national state (or a 'national empire') like Great Britain and the United States. See Pipes, *Struve: Liberal on the Right* (Cambridge, Ma.: 1980), p. 211.

<sup>29</sup>Hans Rogger: *Jewish Policies and Right-Wing Politics in Imperial Russia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1986), p. 23.

[RUSSIANS, an East Slavic people constituting the majority of the USSR's population, Great Russians.  
"Russian am I -- I love the silence of a frozen

expanse." A. Fet. "Tatiana (a Russian in her soul, but herself not knowing why) loved Russian winter with its cold beauty." A. Pushkin.]

Strikingly, in the only two examples supplied in Ushakov's *Dictionary*, the predicate of "Russians" is their natural love of winter. Could this be a trace of the internalized Western European conception of Russia? Or might one discern here an instance of the lexicographer's subtle irony: an implicit reference to Konstantin Leont'ev's famous conservative dictum, "Russia needs a bit more freezing" (*Rossiiu nado podmorozit'*) must have had a curious ring to it in 1939.

It was, however, in the entry following "The Russians" that the Great-Russians received their lexicographic legitimation as a superior racial type, and along with it, the sacred sanction of the all-powerful Stalinist state. The entry for the adjective, "Russian," reads:

РУССКИЙ, 1. Прил. к русские. Великий р[усский] народ.<sup>30</sup> О великий, могучий, правдивый и свободный русский язык! Тургенев. Русский революционный размах -- это та живительная сила, которая будит мысль, двигает вперед, ломает прошлое, дает перспективу. Сталин. Мир, аграрный переворот и свобода национальностей -- таковы три основные момента, собравшие вокруг красного знамени русского пролетариата крестьян более чем двадцати национальностей необъятной России. Сталин. Первая русская марксистская группа... История ВКП(б). Москва! Как много в этом звуке

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<sup>30</sup>No other ethnic group, or "people," in Ushakov's *Dictionary* receives such a value-laden appellation (e.g., the Ukrainians are defined simply as a "славянский народ, составляющий большинство населения Украинской советской социалистической республики").

*для сердца русского слилось... Пушкин. Там русский дух, там Русью пахнет. Пушкин. 2. Прил. к Русский, Русь [...]*

[RUSSIAN, 1. adj. [defining] the Russians. The Great Russian people. "Oh, the great, mighty, truthful and free Russian language!" Turgenev. "The Russian revolutionary sweep is that life-giving force which awakens thought, propels one forward, crushes the past, opens up the future." Stalin. "Peace, the agrarian revolution, and freedom of the national groups constitute three fundamental forces which have rallied around the banner of Russian proletariat the peasants of more than twenty national groups of the giant Russia." Stalin, "The First Marxist Group," *History of the All Union Communist Party (the Bolsheviks)*.

"Moscow! Oh how much is contained in this sound for the Russian heart..." Pushkin. "That's where the Russian spirit abides, where it's redolent of Russia." Pushkin. 2. adj. [defining] a Russian, Rus'. [...]

How did the language, or rather, its lexicographic record, get for the "a" of Dal' to the "b" of Ushakov's high Stalinist lexicography? What implications does this trajectory have for the current debates about Russian national identity? I will address these question in the rest of this essay.

### III. From God to Gaubineau, via Lenin

Apparently, the crucial transformation occurred as a result of the particular secularization of state which the Bolsheviks undertook after seizing power. Their commitment to the universalist Marxist vision, in which social class was the sole "real" category of differentiation (others were epiphenomenal), led to a curious revision of the

inherited system of ethnic and/or religious distinctions. The word "velikoruss" was employed as a secular alternative to the unmentionable "pravoslavnyi" (Russian Orthodox), but its connotations underwent a remarkable transformation -- precisely because "pravoslavnyi" could no longer be used in the language of state. "Velikoruss" thus became a designation of a racial and/or cultural category -- similar to the connotation it possessed within the context of the doctrine of Official Nationality which, in the words of Benedict Anderson, is "as different from *spontaneous* nationalism, whose guise the old regime had attempted to assume, as lies are different from myths."<sup>31</sup> For that very reason, as long the Bolsheviks felt compelled to exploit patriotic sentiments -- they did in the civil war by stressing the allied intervention -- the rational bureaucratic simplicity of the old "lie" remained preferable to the unpredictable heterogeneity of a more spontaneous nationalism. Indeed, the civil war slogan "Socialist Fatherland Is In Danger, which contrasted glaringly with the *Communist Manifesto's* "Proletariat has no Fatherland," anticipated Stalin's doctrine of socialism in one country. Likewise, Stalin's later Solomonic resolution of the apriori antagonism between socialism and nationalism in the famous formula, "socialist in content and nationalist in form," appears to be an elaboration of the civil war Bolshevik slogan. The Soviet world was thus programmed to be socialist in content (recall Uvarov's "Orthodoxy"), nationalist in form (recall "Nationality"), with the two terms pivoting silently on the unspoken third -- the all-powerful Communist state (recall Uvarov's "Autocracy").

More specifically, the term "velikoruss," or "russkii," designated those who did not proclaim themselves Ukrainian, Polish, Jewish, Georgian, etc, i.e., those who for whatever reason wished to be identified with the dominant civilization of the former empire. Thus the term "Russian" connoted a residual, vaguely definable category which referred its bearer to the old regime classification system. Indeed, the old religious-ethnic-linguistic designations became fully secularized, with the ethnic origin (a tribal or biological category) and one's functionally native language displacing the category of religion for good. To use one telling example, the term "Jew," which had hitherto signified a particular past or current *religious* affinity -- and for the Orthodox Jews, a social affinity as well -- became a racial and/or linguistic category.

With the benefit of late twentieth-century hindsight, it has become clear that a codification of this sort of secular, essentially genealogical, *difference* amounted to a reliance on an essentially racist notion of "blood" (with its echoes of tribalism). Precisely such a codification took place in the Soviet Union when Soviet internal

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<sup>31</sup>Anderson, "Official Nationalism and Imperialism," in his *Imagined Communities*.

passports were "temporarily" (but how temporarily?) introduced in 1932. It is worth noting that in the internal identity papers of a subject of the Russian Empire, the only entries that could give a *clue* to the bearer's "ethnic" origins were "name" and "religion."<sup>32</sup> (I shall subsequently return to this issue in examining the treatment of the "national identity" of the Russian peasant). That this essentially racist system should have taken hold in a "proletarian" state, where class distinctions ostensibly had the monopoly on "difference" among the citizens, need not surprise anyone. After all, to use Benedict Anderson's succinct formulation,

the dreams of racism actually have their origin in ideologies of *class*, rather than in those of nation: above all in the claims to divinity among rulers and to 'blue' or 'white' blood and 'breeding' among aristocracies.<sup>33</sup>

Historical experience of the Soviet Union shows amply that "social origins" (*sotsial'noe proiskhozhdenie*), too, can serve the function of differentiating between the "rabble" and the "high-born."

#### IV. Devil in the Details

Following the revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks found themselves at the helm of an empire dominated numerically by the Great Russians, namely the Russian-speaking people formerly registered as Russian Orthodox (*pravoslavnye*). With Poland, Finland and the Baltic provinces having gained independence, the Russians represented the most urbanized, industrialized segment of the imperial population. On the Bolshevik scale of values, this meant that the Russians were the most progressive historical force in the country. But to be a progressive force in the Marxist scheme meant also to be the most cosmopolitan in the Western European sense of the word or, to use the Bolshevik term, proletarian internationalist. This paradox of ethnicity and class in the historical Bolshevism had far-reaching doctrinal and practical implications.

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<sup>32</sup>A Russian imperial passport looked as follows: Выдан ... Управой1. Вероисповедание2. Возраст3. Вид занятий4. Состоит в браке5. При нем (члены семьи)6. Военская повинность7. Подпись            рост:            цвет волос:            Особые приметыI would like to express my gratitude to my colleague, L. Fleishman, for sharing with me with me a copy of the imperial passport of Peterim Sorokin.

<sup>33</sup>Anderson, p. 136.

For the Bolsheviks, who were, of courses, Marxists, the proletariat, conscious of itself as a class, represented the ultimate product of history, its completion, the stage immediately preceding the abolition of division of labor and therefore, for a Marxist, of all of essential difference. A social class of this sort was a pure substance, possessing neither smell, shape, taste, nor color, for it would have nothing from which to distinguish itself -- following the proletariat's scientifically assured victory over the stinking, portly, bitter-tasting, and gaudy bourgeoisie. Malevich's "White On White" or, for that matter, Dante's use of a similar palette for his description of Paradise would pale by comparison with the ineffable grandeur of this totalistic vision, all the more so because the Bolsheviks believed that they were participating, as leaders, in its practical realization. This belief, reinforced by their victorious leadership in the civil war,<sup>34</sup> is at the root of the amazing self-confidence with which the Bolsheviks were able to wield their unrestrained power.

Archetypal "ascetic priests," to borrow a term from Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, the Bolsheviks ruled the country as ostensibly selfless and jealous guardians of the proletariat (recall Zamiatin's *We*), preparing the imminent transfiguration of the entire planet. They were *on guard*, in more senses than one, keeping a watchful eye over the purity of proletarian class consciousness. Whatever "prejudices," or non-class bases for solidarity made themselves manifest, they were treated as "chains" to be broken or "opium" to withdraw from. And when the help of the proletarian state was needed to accomplish such cleansing, which happened often enough, it was proffered with lightening speed and overwhelming force.<sup>35</sup>

Purity, however, cannot present itself as a self-evident truth; it must be articulated in a cultural medium, an objective and a universal one at that if it is to do justice to the historical function of the proletariat. Quite naturally in light of who was doing the speaking, the culture of the cosmopolitan, westernized and rather marginal members of the Russian intelligentsia became -- *apriori* the universal medium. This sort of strategy, when a marginal, sometimes victimized group declares itself the repository of universal values, was the subject of Nietzsche's devastating critique in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, and we need not rehearse it here. The specifics of the case, however, involved a two-step approach. First, the Great-Russian urban factory workers, the "working class,"

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<sup>34</sup>See, e.g., Nikolay Bukharin, "Sud'by russkoi intelligentsii," *Pechat' i revoliutsiia* 3 (1925):1-10.

<sup>35</sup>Lenin's letter on the confiscation of Church property in *Vestnik studencheskogo khristianskogo dvizheniia* (Paris, 1972). 0000.

were to become transparent<sup>36</sup> to the Marxist-Leninist conception of the proletariat. In turn, that conception, in effect, represented but a set of values held dear by the Bolshevik elite, who were themselves a particular articulation of the *Russian* intelligentsia cultural tradition.

My intention is not to simplify the complex road of accommodating theory to practice and practice to theory that the Bolsheviks traversed in the post-revolutionary decade. But in all their debates around the paradox of national self-determination in the context of a socialist revolution, beginning with Lenin's polemic with Bukharin during the Great War and continuing all the way into 1929, when all debate practically ceased or, better, drowned in the war against the peasantry, one fundamental assertion of the Marxist-Leninists was never questioned: the nationalist conflict will, in the final analysis, yield to proletarian class consciousness, which was essentially "internationalist," not bound to a particular culture or a locale. The disagreement, as in the war-time debates between Lenin, on the one hand, and Bukharin and Rosa Luxemburg, on the other, revolved around the issue of whether nationalism should be taken seriously as a rival to socialism or whether it would serve a useful role by dynamiting the old regime, making the pieces ripe for a socialist revolution. "On analysis, it becomes clear," writes Leonard Shapiro in his magisterial *The Communist Party of Soviet Union*,

that Lenin only envisaged a breakaway of the national groups of the Empire as a 'transitional stage' on the road to reintegration under socialism. He insisted that the Social Democratic Party should remain one and centralized, and should never be allowed to become a loose federation of national parties.<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, the key reason for Lenin's well-known criticism of Stalin's egregious display of Great-Russian chauvinism in Georgia, intended for the 12th Party Congress in 1923, was not the recognition of a national group's inalienable right to sovereignty, but

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<sup>36</sup>The notion of the "transparency" of a given ideology is developed by Clifford Geertz in, i.a., his essays, "Thick Description: Toward and Interpretive Theory of Culture" and "Ideology As a Cultural System," in his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (NY, 1973), pp. 3-32 and 193- 233, respectively.

<sup>37</sup>Leonard Shapiro, p. 150ff. Shapiro cites Lenin's work in vol. XVI, p. 512, and vol. XIX, p. 40 (5th edition, 1959-68).

the "assurance that the non-Russians place the greatest possible trust in the proletarian class struggle," waged, we might add, by the Great-Russians out of Russia's ancient capital, Moscow.<sup>38</sup> Even if we grant Lenin the benefit of the doubt, his position proved to be irrelevant both in the short and in the long run. Out of power, discouraged by the sight of the re-emergence of the imperial Great-Russian chauvinism (especially pernicious, as he put it, in the case of russified members of national minorities<sup>39</sup>), Lenin dictated his "Notes," in which he urged his comrades to exercise utmost caution in dealing with the issue of the nationalities. But the comrades, who, unlike him, *were* in power, apparently did not share the depth of his concern.<sup>40</sup>

The ideological dynamic of Bolshevism and the political imperative of maintaining power dictated that out of all of the imperial ethnic groups, the "Russians" would be cast in the role of a surrogate proletariat -- the urban Russians, that is. It is instructive once again to resort to a passage from Lenin's last "Notes:"

[...] the apparatus we call ours is, in fact, still quite alien to us; it is a bourgeois and Tsarist hodge-podge and there has been no possibility of getting rid of it in the course of the last five years *without the help of other countries* and because we have been "busy" most of the time with military engagements and the fight against famine.

It is quite natural that in the present circumstances the "freedom to secede from the union" by which we justify ourselves will be a mere scrap of paper, unable to defend the non-Russians from the onslaught of that true-Russian man, the Great-Russian chauvinist, in substance a true brute and a scoundrel, such as the typical

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<sup>38</sup>Lenin, "Notes" (December 31, 1922). Robert C. Tucker The Lenin Anthology, (new York, 1975), p. 722.

<sup>39</sup>"It is common knowledge that people of other nationalities who have become russified overdo it on the side of true-Russianism." (Dec. 30, 1922). Tucker, The Lenin Anthology, p. 721.

<sup>40</sup>For a discussion of the "Georgian incident, see Robert Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary*, pp. 250-266.

Russian bureaucrat is. There is no doubt that the *infinitesimal* percentage of Soviet and sovietized workers will drown in that tide of chauvinistic Great-Russian ruffraff like a fly in milk.<sup>41</sup>

The choice was either to give up power or to hold on to it at all costs. The latter meant engaging in make believe that the mammoth administration needed to run the vast country under a government, which neither knew how to share power at any level nor even wished to learn, consisted of "Soviet or sovietized" administrator-workers. There is no need to pretend which of these two choices was actually made. Nor is there any need to deny (1) that this "proletarian" Soviet administration consisted of the urban, or urbanized, literate "velikorussy" (whatever their racial origin), and (2) that under the pressures of make believe, their culture, that is, Russian urban civilization running the gamut in education from universities to the elementary school, acquired the mantle of proletarian universalism. The acme of the power elite, many of whom towered over the average "Soviet worker" in education and refinement, maintained their dignity and status by publicly practicing asceticism (real or apparent), by controlling the media, in effect monopolizing public speech, by manufacturing state myths on the basis of Russian intelligentsia culture, and of course, by using or threatening to use the ever expanding apparatus of state terror.

Like other elites, the Bolshevik elite was small and growing smaller -- indeed, statistically insignificant compared to the multitudes employed by the state administrative apparatus, becoming fatally infinitesimal after the so-called "Lenin Enrollment" into the Party early in 1924. The reality of ruling the country under the restrictions imposed by the Bolshevik cult of the state demanded that the government rely on the infrastructure and the personnel that had little to do with Western European socialist ideals, but a lot with urban Russian culture under the old regime. To use, by analogy, the terms from the history of eighteenth-century Russian drama, socialism was translated into the local, i.e., Russian mores (*pereveden na nashi nrayi*).<sup>42</sup> However, because this translation involved, not just high society etiquette, but real, virtually unlimited administrative power, the "mores" became the substance of Bolshevik socialism; while socialist principles and vocabulary were merely their form. In effect, what was taking place was a

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<sup>41</sup>Lenin, "Notes" (Dec. 30, 1922). Anthology, p. 720).

<sup>42</sup>Simon Karlinsky, *History of Russian Drama*.

restoration of the culture of Russian imperial bureaucracy, albeit, the culture of its lower rungs.

Likewise, the old messianic impulse, essential to Russian nationalism of the left (Herzen, Russian Populism<sup>43</sup>), the right (Dostoevsky's Russian "universalism" expressed with such lasting force in the famous "Pushkin Speech"), and put to political use by the apparatus of the Official Nationality, was recaptured by the Bolsheviks and reconstituted as proletarian internationalism on an unprecedented scale. Members of the "Change of Landmarks" and the so-called "national-Bolsheviks" gave credit where the credit was due. Originally implacable foes of communism, they soon recognized that what the Bolsheviks had accomplished could not have even been dreamed of by Kireevsky or Khomiakov. Such "Change-of-Landmarks" intellectuals as Nikolay Ustrialov, Aleksei Tolstoy, Il'ia Ehrenburg, Isai Lezhnev, to name some of the most prominent members of that movement, arrived at this interpretation already during the civil war, and with the beginning of the NEP, they began to cheer on with such a delirious abandon that the Bolsheviks had to hush them up for fear that the spell of the proletarian internationalist make believe -- and with it the authority of Soviet Russia among the left-wing abroad and the minorities within -- might just melt into the air.<sup>44</sup> With time, as the power of the Bolsheviks grew and their monopoly on political discussions became absolute, the need for such camouflage progressively diminished, falling away altogether in what has come to be referred to, characteristically, as the Great Patriotic War.<sup>45</sup>

But to return to the 1920s, when the urban Great-Russians were transformed into a surrogate proletariat, the ruling Bolshevik elite, while maintaining the universalist pretense of the Soviet, proletarian administration, could not help complaining about the vulgarity (хамство) of the Soviet bureaucracy and the woefully abysmal cultural level of lower-class urban social groups. For an elite that styles itself a vanguard, such complaints, no matter how genuine in each particular case, serve the function of

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<sup>43</sup>Martin Malia, Martin Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism, 1812 - 1855*. Cambridge, Mass., 1961.

<sup>44</sup>For a review of the "Change-of-Landmarks" movement, see S. V. Utechin, "Post-1917 Reformist Trends," in his *Russian Political Thought* (New York, London, 1964). See also Mikhail Agursky, *The Third Rome: National Bolshevism in the USSR*, with a Foreword by Leonard Shapiro (Boulder, Colorado, 1987); M. Aucouturier, "'Smena vekh i russkaia literatura 20-kh godov,'" in *Odna ili dve russkikh literatury? Mezhdunarodnyi simpozium, sozvannyi fakul'tetom slovesnosti Zhenevskogo universiteta i Shveitsarskoi akademii slavistiki. Zheneva, 13-14-15 apreliia 1978* (Lausanne, 1981), pp. 103-111.

<sup>45</sup>In his novel, *Life and Fate*, Vasili Grossman attributes this switch to the war-time change of policy, pointing specifically to Shcherbakov's famous 1943 speech. This position must be considered simplistic.

confirming its superior status. A vanguard is supposed to lead and cannot tolerate "unorganized travel," as was the case with the proletcult poets whom Trotsky, following Lenin's lead, mocked rudely by telling them to learn first how to use a handkerchief to blow their noses.<sup>46</sup> These and other failings of the surrogate proletarians, such as an occasional expression of religious sentiment, the "carry-overs" from the imperial bourgeois-feudal past (пережитки), were not seen as insurmountable obstacles, thanks to the Russian intelligentsia's confidence in the effectiveness of book learning, which the ruling elite shared, and the Bolshevik's deeply held belief in the staggering efficiency of their war-time organizational skills, especially when applied to propaganda and/or public education.<sup>47</sup> The role of writers, with their Russian intelligentsia value system, in carrying out this task cannot not be overestimated, and I shall focus on this issue later on.

## V. The Other (Russians)

Based on the notion of class struggle, of dual antagonism, Bolshevik strategy demanded the creation of the Other, which was to blame for the deficiencies of the "hegemonic class" -- in effect, the lower-class, urban population, overwhelmingly "Great-Russian" or, to use the old-fashioned term, Russian Orthodox. There was no need to cast about for an external Other -- the West readily obliged. Internally, things were not as simple. The NEP-men were visible and colorful but too insubstantial to shoulder the heavy burden of maintaining the distinction of the proletariat.

The peasant, the group that posed the greatest threat to the regime, were at the same time responsible for the restoration of order in the war-torn and famine ravaged country. And if the government was not willing or did not dare -- not yet -- to kill the goose that laid the golden egg, it wished at all costs to avoid what, for a Marxist especially, was the inevitable conversion of the economic power of a social class into its political legitimacy and, eventually, hegemony. The cultural disenfranchisement of the peasantry (Russian Orthodox like the majority of the urban "proletariat"), which proceeded all throughout the 1920s, served both to bring the identity of the Soviet proletariat and its government into a sharp relief and to deprive the peasants of a cultural framework which might lead to the establishment of their own political legitimacy.

That the *other* cultural and potentially political framework was based on the venerable Russian tradition of commitment to the social, cultural and political

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<sup>46</sup>L. Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* 0000

<sup>47</sup>See, especially, Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*

emancipation of the Russian peasantry. The majority of the Russian intelligentsia shared in this tradition of Russian Populism (a modern tradition, it must be stressed), regardless of their specific political and ideological divisions. Indeed, the sense of obligation before the peasant could equally well articulate one's ambivalence toward the modernization of Russia (Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Mikhailovsky) or the desire for hastening it (Belinsky, Chernyshevsky, Struve). The victory of the Socialist Revolutionaries, the legatees of the Russian Populist ideology, in the elections to the Constituent Assembly demonstrates the depth of support for this tradition among the population at large. It also goes a long way toward explaining why the Bolsheviks took great care -- even in the heyday of the NEP, indeed, especially in the heyday of the NEP -- to isolate the peasantry culturally.

To the extent that populist sentiments were based on "pity for the peasant's lot" and commitment to the peasant "enlightenment" -- that is, implicit rejection of the peasant's own right to define his needs and values -- the Bolsheviks were only happy to oblige the populist-minded intelligentsia. As Nietzsche and, in Russia, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Shestov understood all too clearly, pity for and commitment to the enlightenment of the "unfortunates," however genuine the sentiment, represent a game of power that establishes the authority of the one who does the pitying over the one being pitied.<sup>48</sup> Given the stakes of this game, the choice of the terms in which the "pitying" or enlightening was accomplished -- whether Populist or Social Democratic -- played a relatively minor role. After 1917, when political power ostensibly passed into the hands of the people, if under the leadership of one leftist party, the grounds for the old-time feeling of moral superiority began to disappear from under the feet of the non-party intelligentsia. One story of this moral humbling of the Russian educated elite is told masterfully by Il'f and Petrov. A character from their famous satire, Vassissualii Lokhankin, a sharp parody of the Russian intelligent, one day found himself subjected to corporal punishment by his irate communal apartment neighbors who had caught him stealing meat out of their soup pots. At first feeling distraught at the humiliation, Lokhankin, an avid reader of Otto Weininger and Dostoevsky, finally reconciled himself to the loss of face by recognizing, as he put it, the elemental truth" (*sermiazhnaia pravda*) of his neighbor's reaction. It was not, however, completely hopeless for the Russian intelligentsia, for it could still retain its prestige by joining the party's campaign for a cultural disenfranchisement of the peasant. Mikhail Zoshchenko did when in the preface to his *Michel Siniagin* (1930), he invited his reader to ponder the fact that modern

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<sup>48</sup>Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Lev Shestov, *Добро в учении гр. Толстого и Фр. Ницше* (СПб., 1900); *Достоевский и Ницше* (СПб. 1903)

Russian peasants were so backward that they looked exactly like the Scythians on the ancient Greek vase, that is to say, had not been touched by the millennia of humanity's civilized progress. Rallied by the Bolsheviks, intelligentsia, as the passage implied in contemporary context, would see to it that cultural achievements of urban civilization would begin to benefit the countryside. In 1929-1930, if we are to follow Zoshchenko's argument, things were finally changing -- for the better.

## **VI. Angry Remarks**

What I have referred to as a drive for a cultural disenfranchisement of the Russian peasantry carried out by the Party in the course of the NEP began to acquire truly ominous overtones only following the grain procurement crisis of 1926-1927 and the Fifteenth Party Congress in October-November, 1927. Until then, the function of this drive was to differentiate the progressive, "proletarian" urban Russian culture from its "backward" rural counterpart, in other words, to create a Janus image of a Great-Russian Proletariat. Contemporaries referred to this phenomenon as a radish: red on the outside, white on the inside. There is no need to belabor the point that while the Bolsheviks' virtual monopoly on the "bully pulpit" assured the dominance of their disdain for the peasantry in public discussions, a whole variety of other voices, many belonging to the so-called "peasant writers," sang to a somewhat different tune (I say "somewhat" because political challenge in whatever form was not tolerated). Esenin was among these. Yet, *his* voice could hardly be a hindrance to Bolshevik cultural policy, for it was the voice of the Poet of peasant origin, caught in the modern, urban civilization -- "the iron guest" of his poetry -- which was inexorably overtaking traditional rural Russia. After all, one does not mourn something that is strong and healthy, and the sound of such a dirge, however premature, could have been only too sweet to Bolshevik ears.

Understandably, as a cultural type, Esenin's Poet was a popular character. His identity was very similar to that of many urban dwellers under the NEP: peasants, or peasants' children, displaced by the upheavals, who had established their elected affinities in the city while maintaining attachments, often only sentimental, to their origins in rural life. Such people are bound to feel ambivalent about the "modern" (the city, industry, etc.) all the more so because they have thrown their lot with it. Poetry like Esenin's serves a function similar to that of funeral rites: they ease the trauma of permanent separation from the deceased and helps one to get on with life.

Bukharin's *Angry Remarks* (*Zlye zametki*), a brochure which appeared early in 1927, when the effect of the procurement crisis could already be anticipated, did not deal with Esenin's poetry itself, but with the thematization of peasant Russia which was beginning to look quite robust, suggesting that Esenin's mourning might have been premature. Indeed, Bukharin opens by citing the poem "Rossiiskoe" (Russian") by P. Druzhinin, which had recently appeared in Voronskii's *Красная новь*:

О русь чудесная. Жива ты,  
 Как живы русские блины.  
 Твои соломенные хаты  
 Овсяной тайною полны!

.....

На кой же черт иные страны  
 Кроме советской стороны!<sup>49</sup>

]Oh wondrous Russia. You are alive,  
 As Russian bliny are alive.

Your thatched huts  
 Are full of the oaten mystery!

.....

Who the hell needs countries  
 Other than the Soviet land!]

The poet -- innocently, merrily, and, as Bukharin recognized, ironically -- conflated stock attributes of rural Russian life with Soviet nationhood. That, according to Bukharin, was "part and parcel of the cumulative ideology of the latest nationalism // *la mujik russe*." The conjuncture of "Russian" and "Peasant," or as Bukharin put it, "quasi-popular nationalism,"<sup>50</sup> was inimical to Soviet citizenship as it was envisioned by the

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<sup>49</sup>Н. И. Бухарин, *Злые заметки* (М.-Л., Гиз, 1927).

<sup>50</sup>"Квази-народный национализм," с. 8.

Bolsheviks. However, its opposite was not a "proletarian internationalist," as many who write for *Nash sovremennik*<sup>51</sup> and *Literaturnaia Rossiia*<sup>52</sup> would like their readers to believe, but a "socialist in one country" -- a Great-Russian who defines himself as someone both superior (more progressive) and in opposition (class antagonism) to his compatriots in the countryside. This, unlike the "quasi-popular nationalism" of the "Eseninism," was a truly-popular nationalism, the kind that was sanctioned by Lenin in his "On the National Pride of Great Russians." Nationalism, Bukharin conceded in a syllogism, was part of human life, "communists were living people, with flesh and blood, and nothing human was alien to them"; ergo, one could be a communist and nationalist. The question was what kind: rural and therefore, spontaneous, heterogeneous, religious, and possibly uncontrollable, or urban, with which the Bolshevik elite easily identified, which it easily comprehended and was able to manage?

As much as Bukharin's pamphlet was intended as an attack, it was also a declaration of defeat, for the Bolsheviks have failed to implement their policy in the cultural sphere. Using the famous metaphor from the economic vocabulary of the times, and thereby establishing a dangerous link between the "superstructure" and the "base," Bukharin admitted that "Eseninism" was far more popular than whatever the party had been able to come up with. "We have the scissors effect, the divergency between the mass demand and the quality of supply," he concluded, offering a rhetorical invitation to the culture activists to seek a deep connection between the thematization of peasant culture in belles lettres and those responsible for the grain procurement crisis. Bukharin's stature and position in 1927 made it inevitable that as soon as the attack appeared in the press (*Pravda*, January 12, 1927), it would be followed by an avalanche of articles -- a propaganda campaign bringing the Party policy to the grass-roots level.

Like books, pronouncements from a high rostrum -- and only Stalin's rostrum was higher than Bukharin's in 1927 -- have their own fate. Whatever Bukharin's original intention, this pamphlet against artistic sanctioning of peasant values was used to initiate a campaign against "bohemianism" both in general among the city youth and in particular, in the writers' community. As the political and economic crises deepened, and the party leadership began making fateful turn to the left, its considerable propaganda machine resorted to every weapon in its arsenal to politicize public life, including accusations of antisemitism. Even the crime reporting in a local Moscow paper,

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<sup>51</sup>Tatiana Glushkova, *Nash Sovremennik* 9 (1989) and earlier.

<sup>52</sup>For example, Iurii Prokushev, "Знать откуда что пошло," *Литературная Россия* 44 (1989 г.), Anatolii Lanshchikov, "Из тупика," *Литературная Россия* 40 (1989 г.).

*Rabochaia Moskva*, underwent a radical transformation between the Fifteenth Party Congress and the Shakhty trial in May, 1928. Robberies, rapes, and embezzlements virtually disappeared, yielding almost entirely to arson, which was invariably reported as sabotage.

The vehement tone of Bukharin's *Angry Remarks*, made almost a year earlier, suited the demands of the propaganda echo chamber of the apocalyptic times. Accusations reverberated and were amplified until there was left, not an aspect of public life which was not politicized.

The result was the creation of a paranoid dualistic vocabulary and grammar of public discourse based on Marxist terminology and logic. Within its framework, any statement of party policy possessed absolute validity and could be equal only to itself. By contrast, any statement that interfered with the party line at a given moment was equivalent to and potentially associated with any other in its class. Great-Russian chauvinism became interchangeable with peasant poetry and went along with antisemitism which was interchangeable and went along with the ideology of the "kulak" which went along with and was interchangeable with "Golovanovshchina," i.e., the mentality of those who resisted the dismissal of the artistic director of the Bolshoi Theater, conductor Golovanov, who was often referred to as a "cultural Shkhty wrecker" (kul'turnyi shakhtinets).<sup>53</sup> In this atmosphere, any thematization of the peasant -- no matter how loyal -- ran a high risk of being branded as *kulak (kulatskaia)*, which is what happened to Zabolotskii's perfectly pro-collectivization *Triumph of Agriculture*. There is a tendency among the polemicists who debate the nationality issue today<sup>54</sup> to ignore the paranoid dualism of the public discourse at the dawn the Stalinist state and to read in its homogenizing light what was originally an ambiguous and complex statement.

The victims of this process of defining the surrogate proletariat were, of course, the peasants. Denied a cultural identity of any positive value throughout the 1920s and especially in the wake of the procurement crisis, by the time of the collectivization they were utterly dehumanized in the eyes of the "proletariat," who would have as little empathy for them as does a butcher for the animal marked for slaughter. Platonov's *Foundation Pit* paints, perhaps, the most telling, profound and unique picture of collectivization, seen through the purely *proletarian* eyes of the *conscious* Russian worker.

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<sup>53</sup>"Головановщину вырвем с корнем," *Рабочая Москва* (15 мая 1928).

<sup>54</sup>A good example is an article by Iurii Prokushev, "Знать откуда что пошло," *Литературная Россия* 44 (1989 г.).

## VII. Belles Lettres: Enchantment, Disenchantment, Re- enchantment

Bukharin's *Angry Remarks* set a very specific agenda for literature and its role in Soviet society:

Литература вообще и поэзия в частности, имеют поистине огромное воспитательное значение. Это "общее место". Поэзия образует характеры. В истории нашей литературы, которая не могла не быть в лучшем случае, радикально-мещанской, есть целые монбланы опозитизированного распущенчества "братьев-писателей", не без кокетства "пьющих горькую", разумеется на благо народа. Если в прежние времена это [...] было отвратительно, то оно становится прямо нестерпимым в наше время, когда нужны совсем другие характеры, энергичные и волевые, а не труха, которую давно пора свалить в мусорный ящик.<sup>55</sup>

[Literature in general and poetry in particular have a truly enormous significance for education. That's a commonplace. Poetry shapes, educates personalities. The history of our literature, which could not help following, at best, a bourgeois-radical line, contains whole Mont Blancs of poeticized slovenliness of "brother writers" drinking the "the bitter draught" not without some coquetry, -- oh yes, of course, for the good of the people. If before this [...] was simply repulsive, then it is simply cannot be tolerated in our time, when we need personalities of a different types: energetic, possessed of will power, and not the dry rot, which ought to have been thrown into the trash bin long ago.]

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<sup>55</sup>Бухарин, с. 10. Literature in general and poetry in particular have a truly enormous educational significance. This is a commonplace. Poetry forms personalities. In the history of our literature [Russian], which, at its best, could not help being radically-bourgeois, there are entire mont blancs of poeticized corruption of "brother-writers," drinking the 'bitter stuff' not without coquetishness, of course, "for the good of the people." If in the old days, this [...] was disgusting, it is becoming practically intolerable now when we need completely different personalities, energetic, with will power, and not the dry rot which it is high time to throw into the garbage.

The collectivisation drive left no room for ambiguities, making clear exactly what kind of a new personality was required for socialism in one country. The task of "fleshing out" this image of the new Soviet man fell -- a natural choice for the Russian intelligentsia -- into the hands of the writers' community, which Bukharin treated with such condescending disparagement in the passage above. But, as he himself was ready to admit, the party, busy with other matters, had failed to create the needed personality (нужный характер), the writers, left to their own devices, tended to "drink the 'bitter stuff' (пить гостью) for the good of the people," and did not do much better under the supervision of those party activists who eagerly volunteered to be *on guard*. A new solution had to be found -- a model that the writers would be willing to emulate. That solution was Maksim Gorky.

This is not a place to go into details of Gorky's role in the formation of Soviet literature and, with it, the new Soviet Man.<sup>56</sup>

Suffice it to say that his arrival in Russia on May 28, 1928, for a mammoth celebration of his sixtieth birthday, came just five days after the end of two very well publicized show trials: the Shakhty and the less well-known trial of three young writers, Al'tshuler, Anokhin and Avrushchenko, who were accused of "raping a Komsomol woman Islamova and driving her to suicide."<sup>57</sup> If the Shakhty trial served to reassert the party's total control over industry, the Al'tshuler Affair was supposed to teach a lesson to the literary bohemia; both were aimed at destroying non-party basis for solidarity and were, in effect, the opening shots of the total mobilization drive for the First Five-Year Plan.

The eyes of the press were focused on Gorky, whose celebrations were being supervised by specially formed committees, including members of the Politburo. Books had been published instructing propaganda activists at all levels how to prepare and conduct Gorky evenings at workers' clubs all over the country. There is no question that the state needed Gorky's international stature to enhance its own legitimacy both at home and abroad; the writers' community, too, had high hopes, trusting that their exalted colleague would lend to their profession a modicum of his prestige and, perhaps, help

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<sup>56</sup>On Gorky and Soviet literature (*Gor'kii i sovetskie pisateli: Neizdannaiia perepiska. Literaturnoe nasledstvo*. Vol. 70. Eds. I. I. Anisimov et al.); Fleishman, Max Eastman, Brown, *Proletarian Episode*, Dan Levin, *Stormy Petrel; the life and work of Maxim Gorky*. New York, Appleton-Century [1965].

<sup>57</sup>I am presently preapring a study of the "Al'tshuler Affair" on the basis of contemporary press, archival documents, and memoir literature. For the contemporary coverage see especially *Rabochaia Moskva* and *Molodoi leninets* (March-June, 1928).

them to improve their woefully low material standing. Needless to say, Gorky had his own motives. Ultimately, the mutually satisfying bargain was struck, and in the place of the almost universally hated RAPP, there was installed the Union of *Soviet* Writers. The word "Soviet" signalled the ostensible resolution of class antagonism between the proletarian variety and the variety of fellow-travelers and foreshadowed a similar resolution, this time on a national scale, announced in the Stalin's Constitution of 1936. The Union of Soviet Writers was, so to speak, the experimental laboratory for the new Soviet citizenship, where its version would undergo testing before being adopted by the entire state.

When contrasted with the economic misery and low status that the writers' intelligentsia at large was experiencing during the NEP, the eventual government compensation for their effort -- both in monetary terms and, more important, prestige -- was exceedingly handsome. Gorky played a key role in this process,<sup>58</sup> and his boundless disdain for the "idiocy of rural life," which he unabashedly expressed in "О русском крестьянстве,"<sup>59</sup> helped to airbrush Russian peasant culture out of the imaginary model of what it was to be a Soviet Man living a Soviet life. What follows is an illustrative passage from Gorky's *My Universities*, which, according to a 1928 pamphlet, was to be read out loud at workers' clubs in celebration of Gorky's sixtieth birthday:

Жизнь села встает передо мной безрадостно. Не сердечна эта бедная разумом жизнь: заметно, что все люди села живут ощупью, как слепые. Все чего-то боятся, не верят друг другу, что-то волчье есть в них... Деревня не нравится мне: мужики непонятны [...] Я видел, что в каждом из этих людей, взятом отдельно, немного злобы, а часто и совсем нет ее. Это в сущности, добрые звери [...].<sup>60</sup>

The life of the village joylessly rises before my eyes. Nothing is heartfelt in this life, so little touched by reason: it's noticeable that all the villagers live by touch, like blind people. They all are afraid of something or other, do not trust one another, there is something wolf-like about them... I don't like the village: I cannot understand the

<sup>58</sup>Avdeenko's memoirs, *Otluchenie* (Expulsion) in *Znamia* 3 and 4, 1989.

<sup>59</sup>W. M. Todd III, "Gorky's Essay on the Peasantry: Framing the Mirror." *Russian Literature* 24 (88):555-568.

<sup>60</sup>А. Бек, *Вечер Максима Горького в клубе*. М.-Л., Гиз, 1928. The book was printed in 7000 copies.

muzhiks <...> I have seen that each of these men, taken individually, does not possess much anger, often there have none at all. In essence, these are kind beasts <...>]

Such was, so to speak, Gorky's subtractive contribution to Soviet citizenship, and it went very well with the decision of the state not to provide internal passports, introduced in 1932, for the peasants. Not only would their culture be banned from entering the concept of the new nationhood but they themselves -- and their offspring! -- would have to settle for an inferior type of citizenship tying them in perpetuity to a plot of government land.

Gorky's positive contribution lay in making the Russian intelligentsia's pantheon the foundation of the tradition of Soviet character building. This pantheon, or a reliquary, comprised a series of historical personages, writers for the most part (Gorky among them) who in one way or another could be seen as anticipating the revolution and the great Soviet State. This strategy suited the Stalinist state to the letter and indirectly served to raise the status of the writing profession. In August, 1931, the Central Committee passed a resolution regarding public education that reversed the "internationalist" excesses of the cultural revolution. In the words of Geoffrey Hosking,

teachers of history were instructed to avoid "abstract sociological schemes" and instead to employ a "chronological historical sequence in the exposition of historical events, firmly fixing in the minds of the pupils important events, personages, and dates." Pokrovsky, the doyen of Marxist historians, whose word had been law in the twenties, was now disdained; kings battles and dates were back in fashion, especially battles won by the Russians. Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great were once again national heroes [...] the foundation and consolidation of a strong Russian national state was now held to be a virtue outweighing the exploitation of the masses.<sup>61</sup>

The Russian intelligentsia's literary pantheon provided the party-state with an important means for openly re- establishing an ideological continuity with the Russian Empire while avoiding positive references to the official ideology, the Church, and other

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<sup>61</sup>Geoffrey Hosking, *The First Socialist Society: A History of the Soviet Union from Within* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), p. 215.

elements of the infrastructure of the superseded imperial state. A worshipful attitude toward Pushkin, which Dostoevsky inaugurated in his famous "Pushkin Speech,"<sup>62</sup> and which had been cultivated assiduously, if rather hermetically, by the modernist poets,<sup>63</sup> became now part of the official policy of the state, with the interminable preparatory celebrations for the centennial of Pushkin's death in 1937. What was once a private matter of the members of Russian elite society, specifically, of the writers and the intelligentsia, had now become the business of state.

Gorky's personal myth, too, played an important role in the formation the "needed personality." The pamphlet cited above summarized Gorky's development as follows: "Как сознательный противник окружающей его среды, Горький сформировался под влиянием книг и некоторых людей."<sup>64</sup> The film version of Gorky's autobiographical trilogy kept pretty close to this spare formula, which, incidentally, reserved for belles lettres the pride of place. The First Congress of Writers was, perhaps, the highest point in the process of *engaging* belles lettres -- the Russian belles lettres primarily -- in the building of the new empire. Even the patronage of arts at the court of Louis XIV would have seemed like a modest affair compared with the extravagance of the Congress presided over by Gorky. Belles lettres had become re-enchanted again, adopted as part of the official ideology of the Stalinist system.

Viewed in this context, the first three examples illustrating the usage of русский in Ushakov should appear fitting and thoroughly justified:

*Великий русский народ. О великий, могучий,  
правдивый и свободный русский язык! Тургенев.  
Русский революционный размах -- это та  
живительная сила, которая будит мысль, двигает  
вперед, ломает прошлое, дает перспективу. Сталин.*

[The Great Russian people. "Oh, the great, mighty,  
truthful and free Russian language!" Turgenev.  
"The Russian revolutionary sweep is that life-  
giving force which awakens thought, propels one  
forward, crushes the past, opens up the future."  
Stalin.]

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<sup>62</sup>Marcus C. Levitt, *Russian Literary Politics and the Pushkin Celebration of 1880* (Cornell University Press, 1989).

<sup>63</sup>Gregory Freidin, *A Coat of Many Colors: Osip Mandelstam and His Mythologies of Self-Presentation* (University of California Press, 1987).

<sup>64</sup>Бек, с. 30.

Thus "Russian" became the transcendental signifier for the word Soviet and, if you will, proletarian. By the end of the 1930s, it began to mean "soviet" or "proletarian" to a higher degree than other racial identifications duly recorded for all eternity in the internal passports of the new Soviet women and men. Indeed, at least from the perspective of the Center, Russian became transparent to Soviet (whereas, Ukrainian, Armenian, etc., did not). The secular concept of "Russian" had once again become firmly established as an imperial identity. In the case of the Russian empire, this identity had evolved spontaneously, and only toward the end of the nineteenth century had it begun to be forcibly channeled into the Official Nationality mold. In the Soviet period, from its very outset, this identity was being molded and shaped by the hand of the state -- to conform to its need of constituting an empire on the basis of what was perceived to be the most "progressive" aspect of Great-Russian culture and civilization.

The idea of "Russian-ness" belongs to the history I have attempted to outline above. How it will disengage itself from it, how it will evolve in a new institutional and political context is a question for the future. In the meantime one thing has become clear: the word русский has lost its "imperial" or "proletarian" transparency. It has grown opaque and requires an effort -- of will and imagination -- to be articulated and interpreted by individuals as much as by the new institutions of the emerging, yet unknown state.

Nothing illustrates this opacity better than the following dialogue between the editor of the newspaper *Argumenty i fakty*, V. Starkov, and the first democratically elected President of Russia, Boris Yeltsin. What makes this conversation especially poignant is that it took place in October, 1992, ten months after Russia had become both de jure and de facto a sovereign political entity.

Starkov:

Борис Николаевич, такой вот вопрос задают: "Как вы себя русским ощущаете?" Имеется ввиду, что мы, русские, в чем-то потерялись как нация.

[Boris Nikolaevich, people ask this kind of question: "In what sense to you sense yourself as a Russian?" Meaning, we, Russians, have lost something as a nation.]

Yeltsin:

Ну почему же? Мы разговариваем по-русски.  
Хотя меня возмущает, когда кто-нибудь из министров  
на каком-то семинаре говорит по-английски.  
Кравчук, например, в Ассамблее ООН на русском  
выступает, а они по-английски, только для того,  
чтобы дать понять, что знают английский язык, да  
при том иногда и плохо... И потом вся моя родня русская.  
Моей маме 85 лет. Она русская. Разве это можно не ощущать?<sup>65</sup>

[Why lost? Don't we still speak Russian. Though true, I  
feel offended when one of our ministers speaks English at  
some seminar or another. Kravchuk, for example, speaks  
Russian at the UN General Assembly meetings, but they,  
you see, speak English—only to impress people that they  
know English, but in fact, they know it not too well...  
Besides, all my family are Russian. My mother is eighty  
five. She is Russian. How can you not *sense* that?]

Not very articulate? Perhaps. But instead how perfectly sensible and inclusive!

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<sup>65</sup>*Argumenty i fakty* 42 (1992):2.