

# The Four Political Faces of the Intellectual in Soviet Russia Today: A Personal Essay

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Approximately one-fifth of the population of the USSR can be classified as “Soviet intellectuals.” Even though some Westerners would equate intellectuality in Russia with dissatisfaction, it is both unfair and incorrect to assume that every dissatisfied Russian is an intellectual or, very importantly, that every intellectual is dissatisfied. However, my personal observations from spending over a year in the Soviet Union lead me to believe that one can make a very general grouping of Soviet intellectuals according to their attitudes concerning official Communist ideology and the Soviet government: The four groups which I have in mind are the dedicated, the disingenuous, the dissident, and the defiant.

## **The Dedicated Intellectual**

The dedicated intellectuals are genuinely convinced that Communism is correct and just, and that mankind would be greatly benefited by living in accordance with principles of Marxism-Leninism. There are, of course, people who *sincerely* believe this. I met and talked with intellectuals whom I judge to be of this type—the energetic and orthodox head of the Institute of World Literature, the resourceful director of the State Literary Archive, the acting secretary of the powerful Soviet Writers Union, and several of my fellow graduate students of Soviet Literature at Moscow State University.

One of these students was from a Caucasian mountain tribe, the Chechens. His name was Alek, and when I arrived in the USSR with my family he was assigned to meet us at the airport and to attend to our needs. He was eager to answer questions and to provide assistance, and became a genuine, dependable friend of our family. Alek was born on a train as his family and tribe were being exiled en masse to Siberia by Stalin. Stalin, a Georgian, shared the ancient animosity of his people for

their Caucasian neighbors, the Chechens. But Alek has studied Communism and at least some alternatives, has joined the Party, and is fully dedicated to the establishment and the maintenance of its ideals as he views them.

I visited another intellectual of this type, Jakov Elsberg, a much older, established literary scholar known formerly as a “hard-liner” Stalinist. During the 1930s when Stalin succeeded in convincing the population that a genuine threat existed from the alleged tens of thousands of spies in foreign employ operating within the Soviet Union, Elsberg was particularly resourceful in “exposing” and, hence, destroying numerous writers. Following the secret Khrushchev speech in 1956, which signaled the beginning of what proved to be the short-lived de-Stalinization campaign, Elsberg was expelled from the Union of Soviet Writers. He has since been officially readmitted, but is now an old man, sick, and, it seemed to me, heavyhearted. Although I would say that he is a man with an uneasy conscience, still he remains firmly convinced that Communism is right, regardless of individual or even institutional excesses.

### **The Disingenuous Intellectual**

It is most difficult for an observer from abroad to accurately determine whether a given individual is of this “devoted” type, that is genuinely dedicated, or whether he is really disingenuous. There is no doubt that many intellectuals adopt a pose of conformity out of a desire to avoid the adverse consequences of loss of social status, professional rank, or other opportunities for material advancement. The largest group of disingenuous intellectuals with whom I was personally acquainted were university professors from Moscow and Leningrad. These men and women know a great deal about Communist ideology and governments and frequently are skeptical or even cynical about them in private, but some regularly compromise their real convictions because of a desire to maintain a more than adequate standard of living. They are materially comfortable. In a real sense they have been bought by the system, and they do not want to jeopardize their positions. I met with professors who were relatively frank in conversations with me, but who refused to allow me to quote them with attribution in my dissertation. I attended conferences in honor of individual writers and heard those scholars eloquently expound views opposed to those privately expressed to me.

Consider for a moment the material rewards for a compliant intellectual, as, for example, a member of the Union of Soviet Writers (critics, prose authors, poets, dramatists). Besides being able to work in pleasant

surroundings as an associate of an institute or research facility, he has access to far more information than does the ordinary student or citizen. This information is both about his specialty and about the world in general. It is available to him through otherwise closed archives or special, restricted library funds containing newspapers, journals, and books from around the world, including the works of “nonpersons” in the Soviet Union from Trotsky to Solzhenitsyn. He not only can regularly obtain without major difficulty the best tickets for the theater, ballet and opera, of which the ordinary citizens would not even dream, but he is also invited to exclusive showings of movies from the West, experimental art, avant-garde theater, and innovative ballet and opera. These performances are never given for the public, but only for small, select audiences. In a country where almost everything is in short supply, the compliant intellectual of professional stature can, through the Party organization at his institute, get airline tickets without waiting or enduring the inevitable frustration of red tape, have access to private resort facilities, for example, on the Black Sea, and can arrange state-sponsored “creative trips” to interesting parts of the USSR, ostensibly to collect research material for future publication.

And try to find these people in the summertime! They are either at resorts, or at their very impressive summer homes (*dachas*) somewhere in the beautiful Russian countryside. I visited several literary scholars and writers at their *dachas* in 1973; many of the most prominent writers have summer homes at Peredelkino, not far from Moscow. Boris Pilniak, the Soviet writer on whom I was working, had been given one of the first *dachas* built there. While I was visiting the widow of a Soviet writer who had been especially close to Pilniak, a truck drove up and two men brought in several pots of food. My hostess nonchalantly informed me that each day cooked food is delivered to her home, and she receives the full pots in trade for the previous day’s empty ones, which are returned the next day full. That day I had been invited to dinner and can certify that the food was delicious, and much of it was made from produce then unobtainable on the open Russian market. Even if the food had been available to the public, it would have taken the average housewife hours and hours of time to battle the familiar lines for every item. As the widow told me, “The Literary Fund feeds us well.” The Soviet system does feed very well those who achieve professional prominence and who declare sincerely or disingenuously their allegiance to socialism.

Another literary scholar with whom I met in another region lived in a magnificent summer home surrounded by a dense pine forest. He

called it “my personal taiga.” I was told that Stalin had built these *dachas* for his generals after World War II, and that the home had been inherited by my host. Expulsion from the Writer’s Union would mean forfeiting not only the most important benefit—which is simply the possibility of publishing—but also many of the fringe benefits mentioned above. It would be difficult to give up such a comfortable life.

### **The Dissident Intellectual**

The third category which I am suggesting is that of the dissident intellectual. He is acutely aware of hypocrisy, ineptitude, and illegality in his government, as is the disingenuous intellectual, but instead of living for the fringe benefits from not speaking out, he voices his opinion on occasion against these offenses. He is burning with dissatisfaction, although he is largely impotent to effect major change. He is likely to be a younger man or woman of genuine ability, but as yet without a worldwide reputation in his or her profession. He is respected by a relatively small group of peers as a real “comer,” but has not yet arrived. His material position is considerably inferior to that of most members of the two previous groups, but he is on the verge of broad recognition and hence, of substantial reward. It is at this point that many dissidents gradually slip into the more secure category of the disingenuous. One of the children of a prominent Soviet author whom I met was a student at the State Institute of Cinematography in the late 1950s, and was then an energetic participant in liberal causes. He almost singlehandedly won an official civil rehabilitation for his father, who had been falsely accused of spying for Japan and had been arrested and executed in 1937. As of late the son’s ardor has cooled. He now has a family, and has been given a fine apartment in a beautiful housing complex in a scenic area on the outskirts of Moscow. He is currently interested in publishing his own fiction, and has become engaged in making a career for himself, thus leaving behind the cooling embers of an earlier dissident fire.

Another young scholar prominent in literary criticism published a significant book on socialist realism in 1969. In that book, among other things, he accused Soviet scholarship of professional stagnation for not recognizing Pilniak as a major artist largely because of false political charges against him. Shortly after this book appeared (and quickly sold out) he went before a committee to defend his doctoral dissertation and was rejected, primarily because of his liberal attitudes in relation to proscribed writers. For three years he wrote and lectured on noncontroversial theoretical material in an ideologically irreproachable manner.

I visited him in Leningrad, and found a former dissident greatly subdued. While I was still in the Soviet Union he was again allowed to defend his revised, much more moderate dissertation, and this time was successful. Men like him can still move either way, but not a few are bought, or, if necessary, intimidated by the system, and quietly withdraw into the comfortable cabin of the boat which they once rocked.

I met other dissidents who were too firmly committed to their convictions to consider major compromise, and they must be among the most dissatisfied and bitterly frustrated people in the world. I cite the example of one family, with whom I became particularly close, in which both the husband and wife are literary scholars who have published widely in their specialties. We spent long hours together while they bemoaned their fate and I commiserated rather uneasily, knowing that I was virtually helpless to aid. But I did fill the role of a sympathetic listener, and thus provided moments of rather tortured pleasure for them as they recreated tales of the indignities and injustices they had experienced personally or had heard about.

These dissidents derive a certain satisfaction from stories of the meanness and moral and economic failure of the system to which they are opposed, since each story further substantiates their own painful convictions. As with most oral stories, these tend to become more and more sensational upon retelling, and provide not only intellectual confirmation, but also a form of entertainment. The dissident intellectuals spend many evenings drinking and talking in small groups of fellow believers.

Another form of entertainment is the joke typically directed at the system which is brutalizing them. It is a way of preserving one's sanity, and at the same time of taking "armchair" revenge, an intellectual activity of belittling the opponent, thus making a superior force appear stupid and, hence, inferior. One of many jokes told me concerned the 1973 visit of President Nixon to Secretary Brezhnev in the USSR. It suffers in translation, but the following is an attempt:

Nixon approaches Red Square, asked a passerby whether this is the Kremlin, and receives the answer, "uh-huh." Nixon consults his dictionary but is unable to locate the word, so he asks a second person, and receives the reply, "yep," which again he is unable to find. Finally he sees a policeman and poses the same question, and this time is told "yes," which is in the dictionary. Soon, therefore, he is able to locate his host, Secretary Brezhnev. Puzzled, Nixon asks Brezhnev what these other words mean. Brezhnev replies that only a person with no education

would answer “uh-huh,” and that a slightly educated man might say “yep,” but that a man of real education would respond “yes.” Astonished, Nixon asks, “Are all the policemen in Russia men of high education?” to which Brezhnev emphatically replies, “uh-huh!”

One final example from this group of dissidents is a Jewish couple. The husband is a particularly astute scholar of the fine Russian poet, Osip Mandelstam, and the wife is a granddaughter of the writer Aleksei Tolstoy. Over the years they had become progressively more disgruntled and finally made application to emigrate to Israel. Immediately both were dismissed from their excellent jobs, because neither institute for which they worked could tolerate association with disloyal, antipatriotic, pro-Israeli, and by implication, anti-Soviet employees. For months Dima and Lena awaited a reply to their request to emigrate, which was finally refused. They were, in a sense, excommunicated from the church but not allowed to leave the building, and were just barely able to subsist by occasional free-lance translating and tutoring jobs. Who knows how long this would have gone on had not Secretary Brezhnev visited the United States in 1973. A friend at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow managed to get articles about these two intellectuals published in the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* just as Brezhnev arrived in America. Because the Soviet government, like any other actively proselyting body, is most anxious to avoid adverse publicity, it gave Dima and Lena permission to emigrate just a few days after the newspaper stories appeared.

### **The Defiant Intellectual**

The last group, the defiant intellectuals, is the smallest but the most visible group to Westerners. These men and women are typically, although not always, at the top of their professional fields, often with worldwide reputations. These are men like the physicist Andrei Sakharov, the historian Roy Medvedev, and of course, the novelist Aleksander Solzhenitsyn. They are articulate in their expression of dissatisfaction, and are fearless in their criticism. They are protected by their international reputations from inhumane treatment only until their behavior becomes intolerable to the regime.

These defiant men and women suffer ostracism from many of their Soviet professional peers, but are sustained both by their consciences and frequently by a firm base of support from second level professionals, the less well-known dissidents. It is not uncommon for the dissidents to demonstrate solidarity with these defiant intellectuals, as did well

over a thousand in the 1966 trial of the literary defiants, Yuli Daniel and Andrei Siniavsky. But they were later disciplined by threats of reprisal, or actually punished with loss of job or at least rank, or with a term in an insane asylum, in a prison, or with exile. The dissidents are left particularly vulnerable when a protecting defiant figure like Solzhenitsyn is gone.

My only extended personal contact with a defiant intellectual of this caliber was with Nadezhda Mandelstam, the widow of the poet Osip, and the author of one of the most significant Russian books of this century, a volume of brutally frank but beautifully written memoirs of the Stalin years entitled in English *Hope Against Hope*. She is fearless and aggressive in her attacks on the system which literally destroyed her husband. Most likely she has been spared arrest thus far because of her age and rapidly failing health, as well as her international reputation.

### Summary

The picture of the Soviet intellectual is complex. While categories are rigid, the people within them often are not. There are dedicated intellectuals who are, on occasion, dissident. In general, however, the dedicated and the disingenuous intellectuals are relatively firm in their positions and are secure in the support of their powerful benefactor. The dissident and defiant intellectuals are under what I consider to be an increasingly menacing assault from a certain Neo-Stalinism which is generally not characterized by mass terror, arrest, torture, exile, or firing squads, but by a selective use of personal and especially professional sanctions. As one observer remarked, it is a crushing of good lives by administrative measures which leaves a man physically unharmed, but professionally paralyzed. Only a comparative handful of willing martyrs are courageous enough to protest at full voice. The rest either complain in whispers, in small, private groups of fellow disbelievers, or simply accommodate themselves to the system, for as one Russian proverb explains, "volkami zhit, volkami vit": "When you live among wolves, it is best to howl like them."

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The intention of this paper is to provide some organization for my varied, and at times conflicting, impressions concerning the Soviet intellectual based on three trips to the Soviet Union in 1963, 1969, and 1973. The last two trips were for six months each. In 1969 I was a guide for a United States Information Agency exhibition, *Education in the USA*, during which time my function was

to exchange views with Soviet citizens for eight hours a day in Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev. My most recent trip was for doctoral dissertation research, primarily in Moscow and Leningrad. In the course of my research I emerged from archives and manuscript divisions of libraries sufficiently to interview over thirty prominent Soviet intellectuals. Primarily they were specialists in the fields of languages and literatures and included a significant number of Soviet authors. In some cases the official interviews led eventually to nonofficial meetings, more personal acquaintanceships, and even friendships. And from these encounters have come the impressions for this paper.

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