

Bearing Russia's Burdens

For centuries, Russia's intelligentsia occupied a unique place in the life of its country, flickering like the light of a candle in the dark. Now that the worst of the darkness has been dispelled, will the light vanish too?

by Margaret Paxson

Pilgrims walk the earth.
Crippled they are, hump-backed;
Hungry, half-dressed;
In their eyes, a waning;
In their hearts—a dawning.
—Joseph Brodsky

Can a nation look for grace? Can it assign a category of persons to bear the burden of its moral tribulations, to be its collective conscience and collective sacrifice, to be its source of spiritual transcendence? In the story that Russia tells about itself, the category of people known as the *intelligentsia* has borne much of that burden. Members of the intelligentsia have prodded and scolded the people, sought spiritual high ground through their knowledge, and endured the loneliness of sacrifice and struggle against the powers of the state. Pushkin and Dostoyevsky and Mayakovsky and Brodsky (scolds and prophets all) were part of the intelligentsia, but so too were thousands of other souls, more modest in their orations to the people, perhaps, but no less full of longing for knowledge and truth.

And now, in the rough-and-tumble of Russia's transformation, what is to become of this intelligentsia, so weighed down by its historical role and by a sense of its moral mission?

On August 20, 1991, under heavy gray skies, I turned a corner onto the enormous Winter Palace Square in St. Petersburg

and saw a sea of bodies, perhaps a quarter-million people, who had gathered in unity against the kidnapping of President Mikhail Gorbachev by Communist hard-liners. The Soviet Union under Gorbachev's leadership was careening toward real reforms, real freedoms, and a real grappling with the darkest chapters of its history. This was a moment of truth.

A public meeting had been called by the mayor of St. Petersburg, Anatoli Sobchak—a professor of law and vanguard reformer—and the decision to attend required for each of those 250,000 souls some sober private thinking: It was illegal for groups of more than five to congregate in the streets; jobs could be lost for attending such a meeting, and futures ruined; police were everywhere. In a scene repeated all over the city, I watched a husband and wife in a somber discussion about whether or not to go. Andrei* was a chemist, and afraid; Nina was an engineer, and determined; their son was a child for whom the days ahead would matter forever. They would go. After a quiet ride over

*Some of the names in this essay have been changed.

Russia's Intellectuals

The people of St. Petersburg, Russia's cultural capital, flocked to a historic anti-communist protest in August 1991, perhaps the high-water mark of the intelligentsia's direct influence in society.

the Neva River on a rickety bus, our small group reached the center of the city, turned that corner, and beheld the awesome sight.

In the 69 years of its existence, the Soviet Union kept the state together with various means—from the white noise of its propaganda machinery to the animal brutality of its repressions. As easy and lulling as it must have been to succumb to the iron will of the state, voices of thoughtful dissent were also nourished in the Soviet Union, in spite of its best designs. These voices belonged to its intelligentsia: artists, writers, linguists, geologists, playwrights, economists, biologists. Sometimes they spoke in the exquisite language of poetry; sometimes they employed irony and satire; sometimes they fell into a simple and quiet insistence on the truth of science and reason and on the need to define one's humanity through something other than fear. By the 1980s, some of these figures had become emboldened to challenge the state directly, and though the Soviet Union fell at last under the weight of its own political and economic system, the steady crescendo of their voices abetted the dissolution.

Members of the intelligentsia—painfully byzantine in their sense of social order, awkwardly ascetic in their tastes, and often entirely disconnected from the people they claimed to speak for—had spent years in faraway gulags for crimes of thought. It was they who had memorized lines of Anna Akhmatova's poems because it was too dangerous to keep written copies. It was they who kept icon-like portraits of Paul McCartney in their homes and burned the contours of foreign maps into their heads. And it was they who had endeavored to lead the Russian people to the historical moment of the toppling of communism, gathering in seas of people and preparing for anything, even death.

But was the intelligentsia prepared for victory and for the transformed Russia that emerged in the 1990s? The whisperings of their deepest

mores caused many of these *intelligenty*, as they are known, to face with a combination of distaste and disgust the new flash of money and gain that infused the air around them. They hated the scramble for money, and the scramble for money (that great, history-shaping, invisible hand) had no use for them. Jobs were lost in universities, research institutes, and the arts; salaries were reduced to miserable sums. While the standard of living for some shot up to levels of real comfort and dignity, for too many others it fell toward real poverty. I saw friends thinned by hunger, with dark circles under their eyes and a new transparency to their skin. Though many members of the intelligentsia succeeded in time in reaping the benefits this new Russia yielded, the fit was awkward, like trying to walk a long, straight line in the wrong-sized shoes.

Overnight and one by one, the heroes of perestroika and the Soviet fall were shoved aside in the rush to build a state. The intelligentsia came to be seen as impractical, fussy, and harping, and as having a haughty distaste for the actual managerial problems of a new country. As time went by, some of its prominent members were “corrupted” by power; others were brutally murdered; still more receded into the quiet of the new space that surrounded them. More than ever before, being an *intelligent* became a lonely occupation.

Many Russian observers have said that it may be time to bid goodbye to the historical oddity known as the intelligentsia. Others have added “Good riddance.” For me, the matter is personal. In the years I have lived and worked in Russia as an anthropologist, I have been moved and inspired by an odd panoply of *intelligenty*. There is Tolya, for example, who lived the first 20 years of his life in one room with his parents. All seven of Tolya's father's brothers died in World War II,



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and his mother saw her parents shot in front of her. Tolya writes books now that are musings on death, on the meaning of money, on the significance of quotidian events that pass unnoticed. And there is Alyosha, who tried to play in business after his stint in the army and who lost everything he had, who would write poetry into the night with fingers stained yellow by cigarettes, and who now teaches philosophy and translates books for a few hundred dollars, to maintain the bare bones of an independent life.

And there is Kesha, an archaeologist and historian who has lived for years with his family in one room in the ancient town of Staraia Ladoga, a place of great beauty in the lay of its land and rivers and great melancholy in its ruins. One night when the sky was turning purple and midnight was nearing, I trudged along the riverside with a small crowd as Kesha spoke of the vanished Staraia Ladoga he had come to know. Oblivious to the swarm of mosquitoes around him, he told stories, and more stories. Every stop furnished the occasion for a toast: a toast to history, to place, to a single, lonely, ruined spot of land. At the end of every toast, Kesha downed (*Raz!*) another shot of vodka, and his

face—even with the drunken blur all over it—said that this spot right here and the gesture that honored it were the source of the grace in his life.

And there is Anya. Anya leads with a squint. I have known her for years, and have always found this charming, as though her mind were forever in the process of seizing everything at a distance and collapsing it into meaning. Anya, who embodies an active, worldly side of the intelligentsia, is a well-known journalist in her country. She was previously a brilliant translator and interpreter and, before that, a bright girl growing up in a home where there were secrets.

What were the secrets? That while living in a communal apartment, where walls had ears, her family read books and talked about ideas; that, in Stalin's long years, three of four of her grandparents had been arrested and one grandmother had been shot; that her own father had been sent to a children's "colony" when his mother was sent off to the gulag, and that he had run away; that her father was plagued with manic-depression; that because they were Jews, everything was

more frightening and risky; that in grave conversations around the kitchen table, her family spoke of the state as something “horrificing, terrible, and dangerous”; perhaps worst of all, that the family had American friends.

Anya grew up living the life of ideas. She brought illegal books into the home and developed friendships with foreigners. By the time she was in college, she had decided to study languages so that she could eventually work as a freelance translator and, with every intention of distancing herself from the rewards of Soviet life, drop out. “Anti-ambition,” she has called this, but the choice meant some measure of freedom. She weighed decisions about her future using the instruments of her intelligentsia upbringing, and, in her calculation, distance from the seat of power was the correct position for truth telling, for an honest life. For Anya, the sacrifices of poverty and placelessness within a system that required placement were noble ones.

Though she saw herself as an outsider and a dissident in her youth, Anya was catapulted forward in the 1990s beyond her wildest expectations, into the center of the fray. Beginning work as a translator, she was helped by an American journalist to find her own editorial, interpretive voice. Today, she is perfectly bold in criticizing Vladimir Putin’s government, the war in Chechnya, the political passivity of the Russian population, and the country’s failures in its advance toward democracy.

I last saw Anya in Moscow in December 2003, two days after the Russian parliamentary elections, in which every party that was nominally “liberal” failed to receive the five percent vote required to gain representation. On that same day, a young woman had strapped explosives to her waist, gotten lost on her way to the State Duma, and, in protest of the war in Chechnya, blown herself up.

Anya was busy with calls from overseas, but warm and engaged and generous as always. As we settled down to talk, Anya referred to the TV advertisement that Anatoli Chubais and his SPS (Union of Right Forces) party had chosen for their parliamentary election campaign. In the ad, Chubais, Boris Nemtsov, and Irina Khakamada, all veterans of “liberal” politics in post-Soviet Russia, are sitting in a luxurious airplane,

working on laptops, and calling on their compatriots to be more like them. The plane—pure white and bathed in golden light—then takes off into the sky, or perhaps into the radiant future. An American observer had called it “one of the most boneheaded campaign moves of all time.” Anya put it simply: “Couldn’t they at least have been on a white train”?

Why couldn’t these now-aging “young liberals” see the ad through the eyes of their fellow citizens, such as the old women struggling to find food for themselves while living in tiny apartments, or the villagers doing backbreaking work for every potato and every bit of meat they eat? Such was the blindness of the members of the intelligentsia who had inserted themselves into the Russian power elite. Chubais had gone from being a young economist in St. Petersburg in the 1980s to being one of the definers, movers, and profiteers of the new Russia. In the mid-1990s, he was integral to the process of divvying up state resources in the infamous “loans for shares” deal that did much to create the Russian oligarchs. Now he was seen by many as representative of an absolutely disconnected and uncaring new elite. Their insensitivity was the worst kind of hubris. Because of it, the liberal ideas that were, at least in some limited ways, a continuation of the reforms of perestroika now had no official place in the Duma. For the kinds of people who think elections are indicative of the larger movements of an age, the golden era of Russian reform and redefinition, of grand ideas and great sacrifices by small voices, could officially be pronounced dead.

Anya, of course, doesn’t want the story to be over. She wants to fight and keep fighting. But where are her comrades?

“Maggie,” Lidia says, looking at me with heavy-lidded eyes, “you have to understand. I *deeply* don’t give a shit.” I had asked her about the parliamentary elections and whether she had voted. No, she hadn’t voted. Of course not. In her St. Petersburg—the same city that had been the seat of Russia’s impulses for democracy and dissent, that had been Russia’s “window to Europe,” the waterlogged, hauntingly lovely, deeply corrupt and corrupting city of Pushkin and Dostoyevsky and



Black and White Magic of St. Petersburg (1995), by Alexey Titarenko

Akhmatova and Brodsky—the population that came out to vote last December shunned liberals such as Irina Khakamada. Instead of electing Khakamada to the seat that had long been held by murdered reformer Galina Staravoitova, they opted for Communist Gennady Seleznev.

No, Lidia didn't vote, and Lidia probably won't vote. She won't stand in a crowd again with a quarter of a million people. She won't carry a sign or write an editorial.

My first memory of Lidia is of watching her eat cake. We were in a Montreal restaurant 14 years ago, and my anthropology department was hosting her stepfather, who is considered one of the great philologists of

his generation. She had come to Quebec with her mother to visit. As fate would have it, Lidia and I both entered doctoral programs at the University of Montreal, and our lives began to intertwine.

Lidia is the daughter of a poet who died long before his time. She is also the daughter of a geologist and writer, and the granddaughter of a Soviet peasant turned novelist. Her family line includes actresses, aristocrats, and philologists. In the unspoken categories of the intelligentsia, she is of lesser but meaningful royalty. One of her professors in graduate school even called her “Princess.”

But as integral as that social positioning—that royal positioning—has been to how someone

like Lidia is interpreted by people around her, Lidia's own concerns are different. Words—their crafting and their meaning, their shades and colors, real and beautiful words needing protection against the idiocy of a controlling state—set her on her path in life. After graduate school, she went from translating heady literary theory to translating novels, and now she is seeking a voice for her own stories. For her, words matter. And art matters. And the meaning of love matters. And life is the only thing that insistently gets in the way.

Lidia is tall and strong (the opposite, she has noted, of Russian men's ideal of beauty), with a long-legged grace in movement. She has backbone. She loves animals—the happy, cared-for ones and the lost and damaged ones—and spent her teen years running after school to catch the electric trains out of the city to riding stables, where she learned the equestrian arts and mingled with folk very unlike those she knew from school. She married a gentle man, an artist, and now lives with him and his son from a first marriage in a two-room apartment.

If Lidia loves animals, sometimes she seems to hate people. I've seen her in rages, kicking the fancy foreign cars of *mafia* men who dare to cut her off in the street, fuming at surly waitresses in Soviet-style “rest homes,” and bawling out men who change money for foreigners and charge mysterious fees. I've heard her curse at people carrying weapons. To Lidia, the only thing uglier than the remaining traces of the Soviet idiocy that once so enraged her poet father is the new class of Russian rich, with all their crassness and empty airs. She can't bear the lack of justice in the coffee that costs nearly what her grandmother earns as a pension, or the insanity of the political world, or, frankly, the new world's surpassing lack of grace.

Lidia doesn't vote, and she hates politics, and she and her husband live on what his paintings sell for and what her translations bring in. Their home is so small and so filled with the objects of life and art that at times she has said she would do anything, anything, to have enough space for her own writing table—about two feet by two feet, no more. Yet the space can't be found.

But despite all that Lidia finds crass and ugly in the world, she still finds wonder there, too:

in family meals, in long hours of tea and talk with friends, in riding a horse or walking her dog, in a lurching trolley bus journey through her strange and luminous city in the violet light of the white nights, in walking, walking, walking the city's streets and canals. And in that wonder—in the restless seeking of it and in the faith that she may come upon it by chance on a moonlit night—there is a kind of custodianship, though it may not seem so at first.

What, then, is this intelligentsia that somehow feels the need to be a custodian to “its” people? That feels the need to suffer in its fight against the state? That has to know small things exhaustively? Is it an epiphenomenon of Russian Orthodoxy, which allows for a saintliness that rejects the world, lives in rags, and scolds the tsar? Or is it rooted in the idiosyncratic feudal system of old Russia, which created an even deeper chasm between elites and “the people” than was known in the rest of Europe?

To those who believe that history careens in one direction only—toward a radiant future of rational markets and computable longings—the Russian intelligentsia has become an anachronism, now, finally, dying. Yet to Russians, the intelligentsia has always seemed on the verge of its own demise: always near ethereal, near saintly, and near buried and forgotten. In that eternally liminal state, the intelligentsia can be holy and ignored at the same time. Perhaps, in that romance of the end, there is something utterly essential to the intelligentsia's existence.

But history doesn't go in one direction only, and longing and grace don't come in neat, definable packages. The intelligentsia that so struggles with its relevancy is endlessly surprising in its powers: It did, after all, help impel 250,000 people to a revolutionary square in St. Petersburg. It created Anya, who will squint to see the distant future of her country and fight no matter what. It created Kesha, who will lift his glass in spite of the mosquitoes that eat him alive. And it created Lidia, who will continue to struggle to put food on the table, or care for an elderly grandmother, or protect a fragile son from a murderous army, as she moves toward a spot of two feet by two feet and thinks about the strength and sweetness of words. □