

God's Russian Experiment: Hope in the Wake of Deconstruction of Gender and Religious Identity

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Umom Rossiu ne poniat'

Arshinom obshchim ne ismerit':

U neii osobennoya stat'

V Rossiu možno tol'ko verit'.

F.I. Tiutchev

(1864)

At a recent gathering, in response to American tourists and businessmen complaining that Russians just simply don't seem to care about helping their society as a whole to develop economically, Elena F., an actress from St. Petersburg replied: 'It's not that we don't care, but when it comes to making a difference, Russians are ambivalent or fatalistic. Our approach to life is guided by the maxim of "avos"'. When asked to define the term "avos'", Elena said that she could only describe it by way of an example: 'Russians don't worry about whether or not a certain number of people will fit into an elevator, they simply step in and wait to find out'. Not just Elena, but scholars of Russia since the 19th century have commented on this notion of "avos". Scholars have gone further to link "avos" to Russians' lack of sense of cultural or national identity and have faulted Russians for taking on other nations' identities in search of their own. In this paper, I suggest that quite to the contrary of the view that Russians lack a cultural identity, Russians' common identity can be found in such notions as, for example, "avos", suffering and finally, victimhood. Such concepts are not results of a lack of culture and national identity, but are rather linked to Russia's deep-rooted sense of identity, an outcome of a series of historical events and socio-political climate.

In the following pages, we will analyze the term "avos" as more than simply ambivalence or fatalism. Rather, we will come to view it as deeply linked to a feeling of victimization or even "victimhood", as an inevitable experience of Russian life which entails the experience of "terpenie" (patience) and 'stradanie" (suffering). However, unlike previous

Western scholarly examinations of "avos", "terpenie" and "stradanie" which saw such notions as hindering Russian social progress and development, we will find that these terms contribute to the development of society by evoking a sense of *communitas*, thereby liberating the individual in times of economic and political turmoil.

This paper relies on information from the fields of history, literature and philosophy as well as ethnographic data collected from 1991 to 1997. A discussion of the background to the notion of "avos" and common suffering will lead into a brief review of debates among Russian philosophers and social thinkers on the subject of Russian culture. These debates will ultimately help to formulate an understanding of the commonalities among Russians in their belief in being a chosen peoples and on Russian culture in general. A particular Russian perspective on these themes will be depicted through personal memories of Russians interviewed, poetry and prose. Finally, this paper hopes to enlighten readers on the value placed on a common Russian "stradanie" and notions of victimhood.

Background

When asked to describe what is Russian, citizens of the former Soviet Union inevitably will remark that Russia has lost her identity, that the only Russia one can speak of ended in the 19th century. Men and women alike commonly enjoy describing the two centuries prior to the revolution as a period of high culture and education. Yet, travelers and scholars have noted a general sense of fatalism even during the 19th century.

Travelers visiting Russia in the 1800's commented on the fundamental attitude of "avos". Dillon (1892) tried to define the term as a fatalistic attitude basic to Russian behavior. He, like many people today (including Elena, mentioned above), was not satisfied with a simple definition of the term, turning instead to proverbs for explanation. Proverbs he used to describe "avos" include: "If a dog is to be beaten, there will be no lack of sticks" or "What is to be cannot be avoided" and finally, "Sin and sorrow overtake all alike" (Dillon 1892: 102). This final proverb is just one example which demonstrates that avos' is more than just ambivalence or a fatalistic attitude, but incorporates a certain degree of suffering.

Western social scientific scholarship has often referred to Russia's sense of common guilt and suffering which originally sprang from the Judeo-Christian theme of redemptive suffering

(Billington 1992: 42). Furthermore, it has been linked to the notion that Russia has been chosen by God to be "The Third Rome" or arguably "The New Israel" (Rowland 1996) and that "Russia is destined by her Muscovite past to behave in certain ways" (Rowland 1996: 591). While the so-called "expected behavior" of a chosen people remains unclear, the fact that 1. they need to embody spirituality and 2. they acknowledge being chosen, do appear as imperatives. It can further be argued that such common beliefs form one basis for a common sense of cultural and religious identities.

The subject of Russia as chosen remains fraught with inconsistencies and has been argued as counterproductive to understanding a culture due to resulting stereotyping of an entire nation. Nonetheless, the behavior of a "chosen peoples" has continued to be analyzed as a significant component of a nation's national character. Berdyaev (1874-1948) is one such philosopher criticized by modern Russian philosophers for his tendency to type Russian personality (Lossky 1951: 247). While in scholarship Berdyaev is often denounced, among laymen Berdyaev is widely read and seen as a conveyor of Russian identity since the breakup of the Soviet regime. According to Berdyaev, Russians hold in common a characteristic known as "yurodstvo" or "being a fool for Christ's sake, accepting humiliations at the hands of other people..." (Berdyaev 1948: 5). He explains this characteristic, along with others, as developing out of Russians' double faith or "dvoeverie" which Berdyaev simply defines as "a combination of the Orthodox faith with pagan mythology and folk poetry" (Berdyaev, p.5) Dvoeverie allows for both the veneration of the Motherland and that of God. Yet, in the end, Mother earth is strongest: "The image of Christ, the image of God, was overwhelmed by the image of earthly power" (Berdyaev, p. 7). Men and women alike felt bound to nature's cycles and celebrated.

1. This argument is especially strong in the context of National Character Studies as conducted by anthropologists during World War II and on.
2. Western scholarship by such authors as Hubbs (1988) explains more precisely that Yurodstvo or "Holy Foolishness" originated in the north and northeast Russia, where the "volkhvy" were in power with the Varangian rulers. According to Hubbs:

The Fools assumed the kenotic role once occupied by the princes... the narod through its Holy Fools reminded both church and state of their lapsed duties... (Hubbs 1988: 193)

The Yurodivye combined in their appearance and behavior "a Christianized continuation of pagan shamanic practices" (Hubbs 1988: 193). Their deep connection with the earth's suffering through ritual songs and celebrations. Petrov Den', for example, was celebrated by women prior to the harvest. It was also called the stradnaia pora or "time of suffering" symbolizing "their own hard labor and that of the grain cut and "killed by scythes" (Hubbs 1988: 79). Earthly suffering is thus seen as part of fate bestowed upon Russians, a fate which needs to be tolerated.

Berdyaev goes on to explain how tolerance of suffering lead to a "messianic consciousness" among Russians, a consciousness which sprang from the ideas of a monk, Filofei of Pskov, who declared the Russian Tsar a Christian Tsar. Moscow thus became known as the Third Rome (Berdyaev, p. 8). Beginning with the notion of "yurodstvo" and developing into the notion of Moscow as the Third Rome, Russians, according to Berdyaev, came to see themselves as chosen to serve in the name of God (Berdyaev, p. 10). While the fact that Russians have in the past considered themselves a chosen peoples remains, Berdyaev's particular analysis of how Russians came to see themselves as chosen has been argued extensively (see Rowland 1996). Regardless of how Russians view themselves as chosen, the notion that being chosen is somehow interconnected with Russians' lives as at the mercy of fate, is reflected in much of 19th and early 20th century literature. This fatalistic attitude and "avos" is fundamental to literary and philosophical portrayals of the Russian character and soul. Perhaps most accepted by Russians as defining the Russian persona is Goncharev's novel Oblomov (1859). In this work, the hero, Oblomov, is depicted as dreamy and unable to cope with the harshness of reality (Terras 1985: 178). He is a man who would rather let fate take its course than act in any way to change the state of affairs. Russians reading this novel quickly came to see themselves reflected in this character and "oblomovism" became the term used to describe Russians in general. Oblomovism and the role of fate, while naively viewed as a hindrance to personal and social development, may also be seen as a positive force, for in Russians common fate is embedded the Russian life, the spirit of the culture. As Tyutchev so eloquently describes, one can only believe

in Russia, even if at times she seems incomprehensible. A belief in a Russian soul, in mother Russia, hope that she will not fail her people, these are the ideas that unite Russian communities and give rise to a cultural identity.

From *avos* to victimhood: the loss of religious and gender identity

Today, as Russians are experiencing uncertain times in terms of social, economic and political development, Russians find themselves returning to the ideas of 19th century Russian philosophers. While in scholarship, notions of any one common Russian character are generally shunned, among laymen, such notions offer a sense of security and one which unites Russians from the most disparate backgrounds even as émigrés in foreign countries.

While the Russians interviewed do acknowledge a notion of *avos*' as perhaps one characteristic attitude, they are eager to support the claim that an acceptance of fate does not necessarily mean a blind acceptance of fate. As Billington points out: 'In the Soviet Union, where both the guilt and the suffering have been greater and more long lived, repentance has provided a rediscovered theological dimension for freeing people to consider an altogether different future' (Billington 1991: 42). On the one hand, what emerges among many Russians is a social consciousness, an awareness of the harshness experienced as well as an overwhelming feeling of victimization. On the other hand, it is a feeling that furthermore unites Russians, offering them an avenue for self-definition in a time when little else unites them. Billington points out that: 'Out of the shared suffering that resulted from the atomization of society and degradation of morality under totalitarianism has grown a sense of common opportunity in the reassertion of small human communities gathered around shared spiritual ideals' (Billington 1991: 42). This common historical consciousness I call "victimhood", is a notion which envelopes Russian communities, allowing for the definition of a common identity and further providing ground for personal and communal development.

Victimhood in its purely negative sense, is not one which is easily accepted as a necessary part of life. Rather, it is in its more positive sense of common suffering, of commonality, that it leads people to move on to political and social mobilization. In the following pages, I will show through excerpts from a collection of life histories, how victimhood is in fact felt, digested and expressed in contemporary Russia. Many of the accounts quoted

throughout this paper have been selected not simply for their factual renditions of experiences, but also for the mood they evoke. It is my belief that, deeply embedded in the experience of victimhood is a feeling, an attitude or a common way of expressing the actual events. Much like Geertz' notion of ethos (1973), it is the mood, created by the style of rendition that unites people in their self-definition. I begin with a quote by a Leningrad blockade survivor:

In front of me lie the photographs of my former days, dim and grey, yellow at the edges due to the years. On one there is a girl... She is eight.. On (her) feet the (girl is) wearing stockings and sandals. I look into the face of that girl in an awkward white hat which resembles half of an egg shell, and I cannot see myself in her. Between us lies an entire life, but I pity her - in a few days she has to go to school... and this school, to which their little girl Oliusha will go, is not very good .. I feel especially sorry for her because she has to leave the countryside for the city, a city which is so new and frightening to her, as is the school. Throughout her life, this girl will change, she will come to know her surrounding world, she will search for friends, she will learn to live among people and to work, she will grow up and grow old, and only then will we meet. Can I really talk for her and about her? Have we not grown apart in time? I close my eyes and I feel how my feet slide around inside those sandals due to the corns on my old toes; ... I'm already not so scared. I remember, remember everything about her! Most importantly, however, I must not confuse where she is and where I am (Creuziger, 1996: 2-3).

In her memories of the Leningrad blockade, Olga Nikolaevna and her peers describe the period under Stalin and sovietization as marked by their losses. To Olga, this period was not only a social change, but also a personal one; one in which her rural childhood became urban, individual freedom became social slavery and with that, her vision of the purity of human existence was transformed to an experience of human decay and war. The romantic novels and poetry that nurtured her intellectual curiosity in her country village as a child were to be abandoned in the new urban school she describes with contempt. Paralleling these personal changes were changes in her environment and education. As she describes:

By September 1, my mother, my brother and I had moved to Leningrad, having left our dog, Kashtanka, and cat, Vasya, with father at Irinovka. In the city, there was a strange smell of strange food, smoke and metal. Nights I was kept awake by the rumblings of carts on the cobblestone streets. With my head all wrapped up, I would cry, remembering Irinovka. Mother gave me valerian, but nothing could mitigate the hatred I felt for this frightening city. Moreover, I had to go to school and get used to a whole new way of life... there was only one book for all subjects which was called "SSSR na Stroike" (The USSR Under Construction). It was very big, with thick pages in a red cardboard binding, and tied in the front with white ribbons. And oh, what it contained! Wild poems by proletarian poets which we were forced to learn, such as:

Stuchu, stuchu la molotkom
I strike, I strike with my hammer-
Verchu, verchu trubu na lome,
I turn, I turn the pipe
i otgovarivaetsia grom
at the crowbar/ and from
v vozdukhe i v kazhdom dome
it resounds thunder/ both
in the air each home

This went on for two pages of rhythmic idiocy.... and that after I had been used to Pushkin, Tyutchev and Pleshcheev!..." (Creuziger, 1996: 7-9).

Experiences like Olga's of sovietization have been described in great depth by many survivors to evoke feelings of pity. Contemporary poet Natalya Gorbanevskaya has, as have many other poets, memorialized the experience to further show the harshness of life under Soviet rule:

We won't argue. An extra million condemned, tortured, battered, is no more than a number. The million tears haven't flowed together, haven't caused a flood, and haven't thawed the permafrost...(Gorbanevskaya in Smith 1993:109)

In this poem, Gorbanevskaya underscores the suffering and losses of an entire nation. She furthermore points out how these memories continue to live in the soul and tears of Russians, much like a permafrost takes over land. Indeed sovietization, while defeated in 1991, continues to influence the lives of people to this day. The memories live on.

To both the spiritual and secular, this period often seems inexplicable. To many, the suffering by far outweighs any potential social benefits of the Soviet regime and war which, in the end were not obtained anyway. Those who do not consider themselves religious may lament their godless existence as yet another loss experienced under the soviet regime. Forced to ignore religious readings, these people were merely made aware of the existence of religion; enough to evoke curiosity and make them wonder whether they were being deprived. A woman remembers: "We did learn the prayer "Our Father" and occasionally we were taken to the village church at least to receive the eucharist... (my parents) did not dare totally renounce their faith. On this weak religious foundation, it was easy to accept later anti-religious teachings in school... ' (Ibid., p. 5)

Whereas the secular feel deprived of potential spiritual satisfaction gained by religion, the religious have explained this depravity of not being allowed to revere God as part of the experience of a chosen peoples. Rather than lament the lack of religious knowledge which prevents them from living out the teachings of the Bible, they have come to perceive their forced ignorance as a possible message from God Himself. To these people, the Russian experience is a lesson to the world of the evil that subsides in all of us and of the potential harm that may come of such evil. As one man explains: "We are God's experiment to show the rest of the world how not to live" (Creuziger, p.209).'

To those who see the Soviet regime as the victimizer, sovietization as a period, has come to symbolize more than suffering. From a wider perspective sovietization has come to represent the deep sense of victimhood felt by those who see their lives as stripped of their culture, their heritage, religion, education, and on a more personal level, their self. Besides religion and education, people also feel deprived of fully experiencing their self: their individuality and even

their gender. Women especially over the past few years, have voiced the perceived stripping of their feminine identity during and after World War II.

Contemporary writer Marina Palei has been noted for her social commentary on the sexlessness that was imposed on women under soviet domination. For example, Palei is quoted by one scholar, Heaton, as evoking the "harsh Soviet way of treating sex" (Heaton 1997: 75). Palei writes: "All these exemplary model wives and bashful housewives are just as intractable [...], cold and businesslike in their intimate lives as they are at the meat counter" (in Heaton, p.75). Under the Soviet regime, sex appeared as a "social and civic duty" (in Heaton, p. 75), women became subservient martyrs, as described by A.N. Tolstoy in his "Russkii kharakter" (1972) (in Heaton, p. 75), thereby ignoring all sense of feminine pleasures.

Olga Nikolaevna, like A.N. Tolstoy, in her memoirs, ignores any mention of a coming of age, of a first love, or of any issues a young girl may encounter in her formative years. 3. Even those who do not lament the loss of culture, religion or personal fulfillment under the Soviet regime still feel victimized: Their victimhood is now. These are the women and men who long for a return to the Soviet lifestyle. While they do not identify with victimhood under sovietization, they do join the cultural lament that victims, they are-- only for them it is under the "criminal regime" of capitalism.

Instead, she stresses the complete absence of gender differentiation among the children at that time:

Girls were not differentiated from boys, and the schools simply did not (observe) the difference in gender, even though the norms in sports were lower for girls. Society now viewed femininity as an old (outdated) emphasis and unnecessary. Brave, agile and fearless girls 'patsanki' were valued. To speak of or even dream about a family, marriage or children was considered improper (Ibid., p. 44).

Contact with ones feminine side was felt to be an unfortunate occurrence. The natural thus seemed unnatural, the pure impure and the self one knew as a woman appeared as an ogre. Such was the perception one group of children had of their teacher who came to expect a child. As one of the children, now a grandmother herself, recalls:

Pregnancy slowly weakened her demanding formality and even her posture became "nonpedagogical": she would lounge instead of sit, holding herself up on her elbows, would walk with a heavy gait, like a duck. Her hair hung straight. We noticed all this and were surprised at how she changed and (we) did not approve of her behavior. Finally she hid for a long time.

Many of the memoirs collected completely ignore the transition of girl to woman. According to the accounts, girls during the blockade, for instance, experienced natural phenomena of womanhood such as menstruation and pregnancy as negative or burdensome. The sense of victimhood is perhaps strongest among women who share in the belief in fate. Francine du Plessix Gray captures the gendered view many women hold which masks fatalism with a belief in biological determination. As one of her interviewees claims: 'For we are biologically determined to think about domestic issues, about nurturing others...' (Gray 1989: 193). According to Gray's subjects, because the Soviet regime did not allow women to follow their predispositions, women cannot be happy (Gray, p. 192). Today, women feel that through their forced ignorance under the Soviet regime, they missed their coming of age.

It should be noted however that the strong sense of being deprived of one's femininity is a response by those who were able to, in fact, preserve a sense of femininity in the face of harsh times. Ironically, the very circumstances to which Olga attributes the deprivation of her femininity have forced her to reflect upon it in a way that a girl growing into womanhood under gender conditions might not have. This paradox extends to the relationship between Russians and their "lost identity" in general: the sense of a lost identity can only spring from a sense of identity (Creuziger, pp. 63-64). Bulat Okudzhava, bard singer and poet, neatly condenses this Russian ethos in his poem "To the memory of A.D. Sakharov" (in Smith, p. 37) in which he describes the hope that arises out of a peoples' willingness to suffer and die together:

When a speech begins, saying that spirituality has been lost,
that the way for people from now on lies through darkness,
in their astounded eyes and in their souls, a holy readiness
to go forth and perish trembles like a new flame.

And this is not delusion or error,
it is the genuinely proud flame of a bonfire,
and in this just flame a smile of hope
comes over pale lips, and conscience is keen.
Their midnight silhouettes scare one with their enigma.
Of fortune you mustn't ask; she keeps her secrets.
And it's too early yet to relish sweet victory,
it's still a long way to dawn... And my heart aches.

As people acknowledge their fate of common suffering, their plight inspires hope and fear in one. Through a shared experience of victimhood, which is defined by its nature to inhibit personal growth, Russians have found a venue for reflexivity and have arrived at a social consciousness that now allows for self identification both on personal and cultural levels.

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