

Interpretations of Soviet State and Social Structure

Perceptions of Members of the First Russian Democratic Political Groups, 1985-1991

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The unexpected disintegration of the Soviet Union makes it necessary to think about the whole complex of problems related to the methodology of academic approach to Soviet and Russian affairs. Much has been written on the fact that the destiny of the USSR amply showed the crisis in and helplessness of Western sovietology. In his recent article, Michael McFaul also outlined the direction toward finding the roots of the error: the USSR was different from other countries in its transition to democracy, and thus required a better consideration of its politics. McFaul argues that in Soviet society the economic and political spheres were tightly interconnected, and the purely economic reform undertaken by Yegor Gaidar could do nothing but shake the old system rather than create a new one.¹

Evidently, the errors in forecasts have been caused by insufficient understanding of the structure and real functioning mechanisms of Soviet society. But how, with so many detailed and specific studies, could this happen? It seems that the reason rests not in the merely technical underestimation of some factors, but rather in the stereotyped view of the USSR—a view formed by common political science methodology. Many studies of the Soviet Union can be divided in two major groups: works based on a theory and so-called regional studies. While in the first group the authors seek to use Soviet material in order to prove the correctness of some of the general sociological or political science theories, the latter group represents a mere reproduction of facts of Soviet life, often in chronological order and without too much theory. The history of ideas in the USSR is most often seen either as a succession of leaders' or ideologues' theories. These theories are usually assessed through the prism of their correspondence with classical Western models, or are being presented without any system at all. In the best cases, some attention is drawn to the similarities and coincidences between some official theories of the Soviet period and the ideas of Russia prior to 1917.

Since a fair study of the political developments taking place in Soviet society could find no room in the USSR itself due to the prevailing political climate until the last years of its existence, most sovietologists represented Western cultures and styles of thinking. In practice, as a result of their use of traditional sociological approaches, the perceptions, elaborated and possibly useful to the study of contemporary Europe and the United States, were imposed on the entirely different Soviet society.

Always trying to find democrats and conservatives as well as liberals and social democrats in the Soviet Union, sovietologists were surprised to

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see that those in the USSR who identified themselves in such terms behaved in the "wrong" way, counter to how they were supposed to behave in theory. Motivations of Soviet politicians were assessed with the help of universal theories of political action rather than by their own wishes and intentions. In essence, the disputes among various schools of sovietology centered around such questions as what particular general theory should be applied, or whether the liberal or social democratic way of Soviet development would be correct, rather than by what views the subject of study itself embraced and which road it wanted to take. Quite naturally, such an approach could result in nothing but an absolute misunderstanding of the political actors' motivations and, hence, erroneous forecasts.

Political science can fulfill its mission to try to explain political life if it

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deviates from the obsolete and arrogant intention to impose standard rules of behavior on everybody. If public perceptions differ over time, i.e., if present-day Europeans’ perceptions differ from those of their Medieval forebears, then it would be quite natural to conclude that perceptions of an individual raised in

the United States will be different than the perceptions of an individual of the same age who was born and raised in China, and that the views of a Chinese carpenter are substantially different from the views of a Chinese intellectual.

Certainly, all of us live in the same world, and since the world is becoming ever more integrated, among people living at the same time there is a growing stratum of common perceptions. However, it is the absolutization of the commonalities and neglect of the differences that has resulted in the lopsided orientation of political science. The discipline should apply the new methods that have been used actively by historians as well as by students of arts and literature since the early twentieth century.

The studies of Soviet society that now, *post factum*, seek to explain the reasons for the USSR’s disintegration, would be much more valid if they proceed not from abstract considerations but from the understanding of the real intentions of the actors that played on the political stage in the last years of the Soviet Union.

This article tries to analyze just one element in the perceptions of the Soviet system shared by a certain group of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic’s politically active population in a particular period of time: from the start of Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms in 1985 to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Some conclusions drawn below about the motivations of democratic policy makers would be important for understanding the development of Russia not only in the late Soviet era, but for the post-Soviet period as well. Many members of the democratic groups have taken positions in present-day power structures and, partly for this reason, the democratic ideology actually has been the winning party in the first period of the history of independent Russia.

The perceptions of the nature of state power and social organization in the USSR, shared by the Russian democratic groups of the *perestroika* period, represent a fundamental part of the worldview of Russia's democratic movement. It was exactly the dissatisfaction with the power and methods of state management that led the majority of politically active citizens to conclude the need to modify this power, to realize *glasnost*, democratization, rule of law, and other similar objectives as they were understood at that time.

Though none of the activists in the democratic movement had any doubts about the need to repudiate the Soviet Union's social organization, the perceived target of their struggle has not yet been studied. This is a problem of great importance. Only when one understands the targets and objectives of the struggle by the Russian democratic movement as seen by the movement itself does it become possible to try to define the role of this movement in the historical process. The real, positive objectives of the movement were determined mainly by its negative perceptions and criticism of the prevailing situation in society.

This article is part of a larger work on the perceptions and ideas of members of the democratic movement in Russia. It is based on the policy documents of various groups, on articles and speeches by their leaders, and on personal interviews with members in seven regions of Russia (one region in every major economic-geographic area). As the author saw his task as the reconstruction of the common, average level style of thinking of Russian democrats, rather than the study of the individual perceptions of outstanding individuals, the emphasis is intentionally made on the documents and interviews of rank-and-file members rather than on remarks of leaders of groups and movements.

The groups are referred to as democratic by such criteria as self-identification or the opinions of the groups' members. This article is designed to identify the real meaning, rather than relevance of use by the groups' members, of the terms and perceptions attributed to them within the given sub-culture in the discussed period.

From Criticism of "Certain Shortcomings" to Full Repudiation

The difficulty in the study of perceptions shared by members of Russian democratic groups is that they were not static, but developed along with the course of time and events. One of the lines in this evolution can be qualified as growing criticism. For many activists of the movement, it took only one or two years to transform themselves from supporters of "true Leninism" into fighters against the "totalitarian Communist dictatorship."

However, it would not be correct to suggest that all of them have passed through such a transformation, and even fewer have gone the full length of the road. Many of them did not change their views, others passed halfway and stopped, and the whole set of various perceptions continued to exist within the movement at any given moment of time. Besides, the pace of evolution was different in various regions and within various groups. Thus it can only be said that at some moment, some opinion became more popular than the others or even prevailed, though no statistics are available. Therefore, this article, attempting to present a logical, rather than historical, model of evolution of perceptions, emphasizes their principal similarity. This

similarity was the reason for the members of numerous groups, declaring their association with very different sectors of the political spectrum, from anarchism through conservatism, to consider themselves parts of the same movement.

Shortcomings Caused by Deviation from Marxism

Perceptions of the members of democratic groups about the nature of state power in the USSR were rooted in the radical contradiction between the official state ideology and real practice. The official ideology proclaimed equality and social justice, democracy, continuous improvement of living standards, and similar ideals, which evidently ran counter to existing realities. At the earlier stage of the democratic movement, many members used to identify these contradictions and demand their removal. That made the basis for ideology and activities of many initial independent groups.

"Is it normal," wrote Pavel Novoselov, a member of the Krasnoyarsk Committee for Perestroika,

that justice and equity, the Marxist-Leninist principles, have to be protected against the people who are assigned to be the leaders of the masses—the Party leaders themselves?! Moral degradation, deaf hearts and selfishness of the superstructure part of the Party and state: all these could not but render their efforts on the spiritual level of our patient Soviet people, the people who have done the Great Revolution, defeated fascism, but so far cannot get rid of the heavy burden of the bureaucratic pyramid.²

In the early stages members, of independent groups tended to see the reasons for the dissatisfactory situation in the personal mistakes and poor moral qualities of the leaders, which were perceived as the explanation of the leaders' unwillingness to act in conformity with official ideals. Gorbachev's first steps were perceived as an intention to make realities consistent with these ideals. The independent groups considered their own activities to be contributions to Gorbachev's policy, and as the struggle against those who sabotaged it at the lower levels. Therefore, they studied the reasons for the contradictions between theory and reality. A meaningful point is that many such groups were called either committees, associations, or popular fronts for *perestroika*, acting in support of official policy, or were clubs of discussion on theoretical problems of *perestroika*.

The Notion of the Administrative Command System

Further on, analysis of the situation has brought about the need to define the system of relations that prevailed in the USSR and especially in the Soviet economy. This was actually the focus of criticism on the part of the reform-oriented leaders of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). The most popular definitions were the administrative command, the administrative, or the administrative instruction systems. The term administrative system was initiated by Gavriil Popov in his extremely popular article on Alexander Bek's *Novoye Naznachenije* (New Appointment) novel and referred to the Soviet economic management system. According to Popov, the system was based on the full subordination of any given leader to the top leader and his full control over his own

subordinates. The crisis of the system, argued Popov, was caused by the inconsistency between the style of decision-making and progress in science and technology. This resulted in the country lagging far behind the more developed economies.³

The term administrative system and its derivatives were borrowed by many democratic groups throughout the country and were broadly used in their policy statements and informal publications. For example, the declaration on the establishment of the Penza Popular Front for Perestroika reads as follows:

The administrative command rule throws the country in the back yard of world social progress; if the methods by which the national leadership is formed are not made more democratic, in the near future the country will enter a period of global-scale economic humiliations. The USSR has already been withdrawn from the world's second position in industrial output; with German reunification and growth in India and Brazil, we shall be thrown to the seventh place and will have to fight in order to sustain it.⁴

As we see, the administrative system was a transitional notion: while earlier the crisis in the USSR was explained only by separate shortcomings, later the criticism was extended to the whole system of management, but was still applied to the economic sphere. In his article, Popov, probably led by censorship considerations, discussed mainly economic management, but it appeared quite natural to extend this concept into the sphere of state structure and policy.

The New Class

The democratic movement, where many participants were no longer satisfied by such neutral definitions of Soviet society, made exactly such an extension. Somebody had to be responsible for administrative management. By Popov's conclusions and by personal observations of theoreticians within the democratic groups, decisions in the country used to be made by a whole stratum of state and party bureaucrats whose power spread not only to the economic, but to the political domain as well. Speaking at the discussion of the Draft Law of the USSR on Public Associations, held in early 1988 by the Democratic Perestroika Club, radical activist Viktor Kuzin said:

Such a euphemistic category as "administrative system"—a category which is equally comfortable for the critics and for those under criticism, is no longer sufficient today. . . . The root of evil can not be seen in the malevolence of a separately taken personality, however high its position might be; the continuing occurrence of villains (in power) in our country, with all the differences of their talents, indicates that appearance of such characters is an objective phenomenon. In this regard, it appears quite useful to study such a subject, entirely ignored today, as consistency between scientific socialism . . . on the one hand, and the practice of monopolization, annexation and forceful continuation in power, the right to dispose of the destiny of the people by one's own discretion, etc., on the other hand. It has been the case for a long time already that the bureaucracy has replaced public opinion by its own opinion, the mechanism of free democratic election by bureaucratic appointments, and the will of

the people as the essence of law—by selfish voluntarism of the *nomenklatura*.⁵

Here we come to the notion of bureaucracy as a social stratum that subjugated not only the economy but the country's political power. Theoretical interpretation of this stratum was quite possible within the frames of the then most popular theoretical idea: Marxism. This could be done by defining the bureaucracy or bureaucratic stratum as a dominating class.

In Marxism, the main criterion of a social class is seen in its relation to the means of production. Hence, the bureaucratic class was recognized as the dominating one in Soviet society. V. Fyodorov, a writer in the *Grazhdanskii Referendum* magazine of the Moscow Popular Front, wrote in this regard:

Certainly, the dominating class in Soviet society is *bureaucracy* that has monopolized all functions of management in all spheres of social life, and relies on the broad network of totalitarian and power structures: party, state machinery, public associations (to be precise, pseudo-public, as they are imposed from the top), and bureaucratically organized working collectives.⁶

The term totalitarianism, mentioned in the quoted paragraph, gradually has spread ever more broadly among the Russian democratic community. Abroad, the concept concerning Soviet society was discussed only by one school of political science. Its application at least to the post-Stalinist Soviet society was broadly criticized. In Russia, however, and within Russian democratic groups it has become most popular to define Soviet society as totalitarian. Unlike in the West, the discussion did not focus on whether there was totalitarianism in the USSR, but on what kind of totalitarianism it was and what the essence was of the Soviet totalitarian society.⁷ The discussion revealed the three major views addressed below.

The Soviet System as a Political Regime

One of the options in trying to understand the Soviet system of power by the democratic activists was to interpret it as a political regime. In this option, the regime—most often qualified as totalitarian, but sometimes also defined as an administrative system, a dictatorship of bureaucracy, Stalinism, or a Communist dictatorship—was understood as usurpation, illegal seizure, and monopolization of political power by a certain political force carrying out a selfish “anti-people” policy.

The milder version designated by the advocates of Leninist socialism suggested that power had been seized after the demise of Lenin and the elimination of his associates. The anti-Communists attributed such seizure of power to October 1917, and labeled the Bolsheviks wholly as usurpers. In all of these options, the common feature was to refer to totalitarianism in the sphere of politics and power and to understand it as the imposition of the dominating political group's will upon the others.

“The totalitarian state,” says Alexander Osovtsov, who later became a leader of the Democratic Russia movement, “is marked first and foremost by the fact that power belongs to one and only one force, group, team, whose

program of action is considered as the only correct one and thus necessarily the only one worth realization, and whose norms and principles are announced as perfect and compulsory. . . .”⁸ According to Osovtsov, the antithesis to totalitarianism is pluralism.

Interpreted in such terms, totalitarianism has a lot in common with any dictatorship. The Russian democrats could use this meaning of the term totalitarianism as a synonym for dictatorship, autocracy, authoritarianism, Stalinism, Communist regime, and tsarist autocracy, or oligarchy, and in this case no universal meaning was attributed to the word.

The Soviet System as a Social System

Interpretation of totalitarianism as merely a political regime represented the most superficial view of the problem. Raised in Marxist traditions, by which the political arena was considered only part of the superstructure over the productive forces, the better educated members of the democratic movement tried to undertake a more profound search of the roots of the Soviet regime. By their conclusion, the base of Soviet totalitarianism was made by the new dominating class of bureaucracy that subjugated society.

That socialism generated the appearance of this new class was not a novelty for Marxism. Even Lev Trotsky, expanding on the formation of bureaucratic stratum in the USSR, qualified Stalin’s regime as a “dictatorship of the secretariat.” After Trotsky’s demise, his followers tended to consider bureaucracy as the new stratum that had expropriated the proletariat. Such ideas were

certainly familiar to well-educated Marxists in the Soviet bloc. The textbook case study is *The New Class* by former Yugoslavian Communist Milovan Djilas.⁹ Basing his judgment

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mainly on the above ideas, Djilas, however, went far beyond them and qualified bureau-crazy in Marxist terms as a social class that usurped the right to possess the means of production.

While Djilas sometimes defined the Soviet system as a new despotism, he did not interpret it as a restoration of pre-capitalist social institutions. This was done by Soviet émigré Mikhail Voslensky in his book *Nomenklatura: The Soviet Ruling Class*, whereby the ruling class of Soviet society was represented by *nomenklatura* bureaucrats in positions that could be taken only with the approval of the higher-level party committee.¹⁰ These works circulated among Soviet intellectuals well before Gorbachev’s advent to power. Nevertheless, as seen from the interviews, the activists of democratic groups almost never borrowed the ideas of the new class directly from publications prohibited in the USSR, whose circulation was too narrow. Many activists in Moscow, to say nothing of the provinces, were not familiar with the *samizdat* Soviet underground publications, or *tamizdat* foreign publications of banned authors. In many cases, the ideas of Marxist critics of the USSR were taken from articles published in official periodicals.

In terms of frequency of quotations, an article by Sergey Andreev, a young economist from Leningrad, rendered the strongest influence on democratic activists. Published in the magazine *Ural*, the article considered

the Soviet bureaucracy to be a class in terms of Marxist theory.¹¹ As was the case with the earlier publication by Popov, clubs and groups were holding discussions and seminars on Andreev's article, preparing papers, and reprinting and reproducing the article's provisions in independent publications.

In fact, Andreev's article contained no news in comparison with the works written by Djilas or Voslensky, but the advantage was that it was published in an official and popular literary magazine rather than an obscure academic journal, when the reading public attentively followed every such publication. The conclusions of the article turned out to be extremely timely.

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An interesting point is that the article made no reference to the authors of the new class theory, and the idea was presented as if discovered by the author. It is difficult to say whether Andreev, who was himself a leader of a democratic group, was aware of the other works, or whether he did not refer to them for tactical reasons such as the censorship that was still practiced. However, it appears quite possible and even natural that a social scientist could come to a similar independent conclusion.

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Valentin Manuilov, an activist of the Penza Political Club, said, for example, that he had come to similar conclusions when he was working on his dissertation on the period of transition from capitalism to socialism and communicating with liberal specialists on Marxist theory. In the course of his studies of what had been qualified by Lenin as state capitalism and the problems of the new economic policy (NEP), he scrutinized articles by Lenin and early Marxists and found in them excerpts from Marx's works on Russia that had been unpublished in the USSR.

Addressing the then-fashionable problem of “contradictions of socialism,” Manuilov concluded that the growth of bureaucratism was predetermined by the very character of modern production, in which an individual becomes a cog in a huge machine. Manuilov admits that he was influenced by talks with Yevgeny Ambartsumov and Alexander Tsytko, the renowned liberal Marxists of that time, who quite well could have introduced him to the new class theory. “And evidently,” says Manuilov,

all that communication, some talks and intuition, coupled with the observations [that were possible before the autumn of 1987] over the activities of the Party bureaucracy—all that somehow led also to the conclusion that bureaucracy was a class. Even in 1987 we didn't consider it as something unique; I mean, it seemed quite natural that bureaucracy was a class or at least a class-like group. . . The problem was to understand how hierarchic relations were built within that class or class-like group, who was playing a leading role there, and who was playing just a role. It was clear

that within the bureaucracy the party was taking the leading positions vis à vis the economic bureaucracy.¹²

Certainly the CPSU was seen as the core of the dominating class and was blamed for the societal crisis. For example, the program of one of the parties stated that “not the individuals, but the whole system of partocracy has been a source of people’s troubles in the last 70 years.”¹³ Even the most extreme radicals did not consider all members of the CPSU to be involved in the system of “partocracy.” The ruling party was seen not as a political party as such, but rather as a special social institution, and membership was considered a social privilege. The institution appeared as a result of the actual convergence of the party and state, and thus the so-called state-class emerged. The Draft Program of the Democratic Union defines the totalitarianism that dominated the USSR as “the state system based on monopoly of the partocratic state, represented by its bureaucracy: monopoly of power, ownership, ideological and cultural life, totalitarian nationalization of all spheres of social life, and the elimination of civil society.”¹⁴

The most often heard were statements to the effect that the ruling class included only the *nomenklatura* portion of the party, while there was no difference between the rank-and-file party members and non-members. The judgment was to a large extent preconditioned by the fact that many activists of democratic movements themselves were members of the CPSU. In this context, the analysis of the sources of dictatorship in the USSR made by Vasily Krasulya, the leader of the Stavropol Popular Front, represents a good case in point:

The schemes and ideas, estranged from real life, could not become the life of the people and were alien to the people. In order to realize those fantasies of the party, a bureaucratic machine had to be built, the *nomenklatura* that gradually usurped the whole power and substituted political life in the country with their bureaucratic hustle and bustle. The bureaucracy inevitably has become punitive and repressive. . . . Our country has paid a dear price for the attempts to realize the law, “discovered” by Marx, on the need for proletarian dictatorship in the period of transition. Actually, a bunch of top party workers ruled on behalf of the proletariat, and a dictatorship of the proletariat was transformed, as Trotsky said, into the dictatorship of the secretariat.¹⁵

The influence of Marxist terminology on the theory of new class domination of the USSR is evident. Even criticizing Marx, many activists continued to refer to Marxist, though formerly prohibited, authors. While repudiating Marxism, democratic activists have been maintaining many Marxist approaches toward, and basic perceptions of, the Soviet state and society. This trend is amply illustrated in one of the draft programs of the Social Democratic Party of Russia (SDPR):

History has proven the full failure of Marxism-Leninism. Realization of this teaching about the so-called dictatorship of the proletariat has ultimately led to the dictatorship of one tyrant, to unprecedented bureaucracy and to the actual formation of the new elite class. . . . The elite class has seized political power as well as the whole system of distribution of material and

financial resources, and thus has canceled the essentially more efficient market system.¹⁶

Marxist theory was not the only source of perception about the state bureaucracy as a dominating class. According to A. Shubin, an activist of the Obshchina anarchist group, its theoreticians have taken a somewhat different road. Having reached a conclusion about the class character of bureaucracy through the study of Marxist documents, they found substantiation of the theory in the works of Russian anarchists and populist *narodniks*, especially Mikhail Bakunin. They received Bakunin's ideas by which collectivization and rule from a single center—the measures proposed by Marx—would generate the appearance of the new class and new state dictatorship. These ideas, available in Bakunin's works officially published in the USSR, supported and developed the initial Marxist conclusions by Shubin and his friend, and generated their interest in anarchism and the *narodnik* movement.

The subsequently read works by the Marxist architects of the new class theory, Shubin said, seemed correct, but of secondary origin.¹⁷ Whatever the roads leading the democratic theoreticians to the understanding of Soviet society as divided between the new classes of exploiters and exploited, they reached the common understanding of the Soviet social structure as some social system. With such understanding, the democrats, raised by the Marxist theory of social formations progressively changing in succession, inevitably sought to define the place of that social system in the scale of social evolution.

The Soviet System as a Historical Regression

Because the viciousness of the Soviet totalitarian system and its backwardness vis à vis capitalism were clear for the democrats, they quite naturally saw totalitarianism as a backslide to the pre-capitalist level of development, or a historical regression.

For example, the above-cited Fyodorov considered Soviet society as divided between the classes of slaves and slave owners and thus, in terms of the development level, refers to it as a slave-owning society:

The economic system of state slave ownership, where slave owners are represented by the bureaucracy class and slaves by the working people such as laborers, peasants, and intellectuals, where bureaucracy faces direct competition on the part of the continuously reviving bourgeoisie and a stable economic opposition on the part of the petit bourgeoisie—such a system inevitably requires a political superstructure in the form of a totalitarian state, because otherwise such a system cannot be kept in balance. The progress of the surrounding civilized world inspires such a system to twist the screws of totalitarianism ever more tightly.¹⁸

This excerpt sets forth several important perceptions, widely spread among members of the democratic groups: interpretation of Soviet society as divided between the two opposing classes, which are bureaucracy (the class of exploiters owning all properties of the state) and all others (the exploited class of non-owners); and the naturally pre-determined appearance of the repressive state for which repressions were the only method of struggle to

retain the monopoly of ownership. However, the most significant point in such analysis is its strict abidance by Marxist theory in relating such a society to the stage of pre-capitalist formations: in this case, to slave ownership.

Slave ownership as described by Fyodorov has very little in common with slave ownership, for example, in ancient Greece. Because of the tremendous role of the Soviet state, the USSR was most often compared to ancient Oriental societies. These ideas, too, are not at all a novelty in Marxism. As early as 1906, long before the victory of the Bolshevik Revolution, Grigory Plekhanov, the first Russian Marxist, spoke at the Fourth Congress of the RSDRP against Lenin's proposal on nationalization of land. Plekhanov characterized it as a "dangerous," "anti-revolutionary," and "reactionary" measure that would "reverse the course of Russian history."¹⁹

In this judgment, he proceeded from Marx's remarks about Asiatic despotism, based on the absence of private property. Tending to see the old order in Russia as the "Moscow version of the economic order that had been laid in the basis of all grand despots" when the "land and land owners were the property of the state,"²⁰ Plekhanov believed that fulfillment of the Bolsheviks' program would result in restoration of the ancient Moscow Princedom's orders in Russia and in the new enslavement of peasants by the "Leviathan state."²¹

Quite naturally, after 1917 when Bolshevik rule was becoming ever more despotic, Plekhanov's ideas were widely circulating among Marxist critics of the Bolsheviks as well as among the Bolshevik-oriented opponents of the harder-line regime. The latter, deprived of the possibility to write openly about the government, were making their conclusions through the study of Oriental countries, especially China. In so doing, they somehow warned the Bolshevik leaders against the turn to backward Asiatic despotism.

“. . . opponents of socialism would say that socialism as such means a 'return' to Oriental despotism."

There was just one more step to be made to announce the system formed in the USSR, especially after the Stalinist collectivization, as Oriental despotism. This could be done both by those who continued to think within the frames of Marxism and socialism, and by those who opposed socialism. The only difference is that the advocates of socialism would consider Soviet society as a return to the pre-socialist and even pre-capitalist system and would believe that real socialism has never been reached at all, while the opponents of socialism would say that socialism as such means a "return" to Oriental despotism. Meanwhile, the very idea of Oriental despotism, based on total state ownership, and the idea of the crucial difference between the latter and Western society would in both cases be the same.

That the same individual can undergo transformation from the first to the latter position is amply shown by K. A. Wittfogel, an American scholar of German origin who started his studies of China in the early 1920s as a Marxist, and whose classical book *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study*

of *Total Power* was published in 1957 in the United States. Without seeing the USSR as the twentieth century's replica of his "hydraulic society" or Oriental despotism, Wittfogel argued that the Soviet system produced a combination of the major features of such a society, on the one hand, and modern technology and material bureaucracy on the other, resulting in the society of "total political power as well as total societal and intellectual control" that had never existed in the ancient Orient.²²

Certainly, Wittfogel was aware of the notion of totalitarianism, which at about the same time was under elaboration by Western political scientists, and by which Nazi Germany and the Communist USSR were considered as a new type of society of total control based on the breakthroughs of science and technology.²³ What made Wittfogel's theory unlike the others was that he combined totalitarianism of Western political scientists with Marxist theories of the Asian mode of production, and emphasized the typological similarity between the Soviet societal organization and the traditional Oriental societies, seeing both as based on what he called total power.

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argued, was more progressive. Proceeding from such an approach, Voslensky defined the October Revolution of 1917 as a "counter-revolution."²⁴

The ideas, similar to the theories by Wittfogel and Voslensky, can be found in abundance in the informal periodicals of the *perestroika* period. Perceptions of Soviet totalitarianism as a backslide to "Asianism" or at least as a society "covered by the sprouts" of the Russian past, were broadly shared by adherents to various orientations. For example, the program of the furthest left of all micro-parties in Russia, the Socialists, said:

The attempts to build socialism in a backward country which did not have a developed industry and which was isolated from the rest of the world and destroyed by a many-year war could not be successful. . . . In such a situation, revolutionary power inevitably took the form of dictatorship that initially was supported by the working people but then was ever more self-isolated from the masses. In the end, the rapid bureaucratization and degeneration of the regime resulted in the formation of totalitarian dictatorship and the system of Stalin's personal power. . . . By the early '30s the totalitarian system, based on the state and bureaucratic exploitation of working people and extra-economic coercion (statocracy), had nothing in common with socialism and, even worse, was reproducing the pre-capitalist relations to a considerable extent. . . . The bureaucratic machine, consolidating its domination with the help of terror, remained the only organizing force in such *déclassé* society.²⁵

The Democratic Union, the party of the most radical anti-Communist orientation, identically assessed Soviet society:

After October 1917, the Bolsheviks started to build a new state—the totalitarian system based on the state (Asian) mode of production qualified by them as socialist.

The totalitarian system organically integrated the industrial productive forces, quite modern for the twentieth century, and at the same time marked the further movement of the country along the “Asian” branch of the road of history, thus being a successor to Oriental despotic states. Unlike the latter case, however, the communal structures under the totalitarian system are substantially destroyed and suppressed, while the [individual] personality is controlled not so much indirectly (i.e., through the community), but rather directly by the state and thus is much more badly destroyed and impersonified.

The societal and economic system created by the Bolsheviks, where the most active role is assigned for the owning state—that in the absence of private (i.e., independent of the state) property acts as a collective exploiter relying on the system of extra-economic coercion—revived the past in the most barbaric forms. It restored the relations of slave ownership (labor of dozens of millions of prisoners) and serfdom (the Stalinist *kolkhozy*). It built the pyramid-shaped hierarchical system of management where the lower level blindly obeys the will of the upper level. The society split in two confronting camps, the ruler and the ruled, and there appeared a new class of exploiters, *nomenklatura*, that was using the state itself for its own needs.

The working people are alienated from the means of production and, even worse, they are no longer the owners of their labor and their intellect; due to the monopoly of the state as their only employer, they have become state serfs.

The slogan of proletarian dictatorship was used to establish the bloody dictatorship of partocracy. For the first time in history, the totalitarian party-state was built in the USSR where the party structures have become the core of the state structure and subjugated the latter.²⁶

Certainly, the popularity of such ideas once expressed by Wittfogel does not mean that many members of independent public groups were familiar with his works. For most of the activists, Wittfogel’s writings were not available. However, such ideas were actively discussed in the academic and especially Orientalist community of Russia within the discussion, re-started in the 1960s, on the Asian mode of production.²⁷ Though the advocates of this theory were not a majority among the researchers, they could publish their views and propagate them for the students—at least as long as they acted as interpreters of Marxism and did not apply the Asian concept to the contemporary USSR. While such application was prohibited, the sub-context of the discussion was absolutely clear. The following excerpt represents a most typical 1970s academic description of the Asian (in this case, Chinese) society:

The dominating class of Chinese despotism, supported by a certain unity between ownership and power, acted first and foremost as a collective exploiter, as “class and state.” Representing a certain extent of unity between the basis and superstructure phenomena, Chinese despotism not only was a powerful instrument of class domination, but rendered a substantial influence on the process of class formation; the extent of vicinity to power was becoming the major sign of social status. Antagonistic in nature, the despotic social and political structure at the

same time fulfilled important functions of integration, as it consolidated the economically atomized society and contained its centrifugal trends.

In the conditions of such despotism there developed a rather peculiar (in our European view) idea of private property having a more than 2000-year history. As for the sphere of legal relations among private individuals, the subject of the Chinese empire had certain guarantees for his property, and that could not but render a considerable effect on the specifics of social and economic development in China. ...

Despotism, the Chinese empire ever more broadly expanded its economic and social functions and ever more actively used their political power in order to contain the social and economic process that jeopardized the old system. The political monopoly, the political force had been able to suppress the opposition within a long period of history; however, in the conditions of the new epoch, it generated political impotence that doomed the once great China to full political subordination to the capitalist powers.²⁸

It was not too difficult to apply such conditions to Soviet society, to withdraw some Marxist phraseology, and to insert the prohibited term "totalitarianism." Exactly this undertaking was accomplished by the theoreticians of the Democratic Union and many of their colleagues. Their maneuver is clearly visible in their language; indeed, it is much easier to announce oneself a foe of Marxism than to stop thinking in the Marxist categories that have been studied since elementary school.

"... the Soviet system was perceived as a historical regression. ..."

For exactly this reason, the programs of socialists and even of the more radical organizations contain such fun-

damental Marxist categories as "class," "exploitation," "mode of production," and even such Soviet Marxist terms as "leading force." In one of the 1990 draft programs of the Social Democratic Party, the description of the Soviet system by all major points actually repeats the above description of "Chinese despotism":

Set by the Communist Party, the initially vicious Utopian objective was to build a mono-system society, the "single factory," ruled and planned in a totalitarian way. Such an objective inevitably required the mechanism of *diktat*, organized violence and ideological indoctrination that provided for the domination of the new ruling stratum. The bureaucracy of the Communist Party has become the leading force of the bureaucratic system, the punitive bodies, and the propaganda institutions. Power has become the major category in the new type of society, and the build-up and consolidation of power have become the main objectives of the ruling oligarchy. Destruction of the civil society, concentration of the able-bodied population in controllable collectives, nationalization of social life, and elimination of the opposition enabled the oligarchy to produce the historically unprecedented form of totalitarianism. There has emerged a hierarchical system: the bureaucratic state headed by the party at the top, the latter ruling the socially uniform-leveled population brought down to the position of state serfs or slaves.²⁹

The perception of the Soviet system as the return to Asiatic despotism, despite its popularity, was not the only form to define the system's place in the scale of social evolution. Sometimes the Soviet system was defined as "social-feudal" or "state-feudal"; the left anarchists, seeking to emphasize the Soviet system's similarity to "capitalism," tended to define it as "state capitalist." However, in any case, the Soviet system was perceived as a historical regression or at least as a kind of historical skidding, both taking place while Western society was marching ahead along the road of social progress. For example, the platform of the Vladivostok Democratic Club, adopted in 1989, almost word for word repeated the "capital city" definitions and qualified Soviet society as "social feudalism."³⁰

A good illustration of the above scheme is that the CPSU and its privileges were often seen as restoration of the estates and class privileges typical of pre-1917 Russia. An opinion was voiced that the monopoly power of the CPSU, as fixed in the Soviet Constitution, was "a restoration of tsarist aristocracy in new historical forms,"³¹ and that membership in the CPSU was merely a restoration of class privileges that had existed in tsarist Russia. Pavel Poluyan, an activist of the Krasnoyarsk Committee for Perestroika, wrote:

Now, as is clear to everybody, the CPSU membership card is not evidence of either the moral level or even the ideological affinities of an individual. In fact, membership in the CPSU has become a sign of one's class. . . . While the association with the party estate cannot be inherited now . . . many sights of the estate classifications are obvious. What matters is not even the gap between "the haves and the have-nots" (among Russian nobles, too, there used to be tsarist ministers and impoverished drunkards), but that the historical tradition turns out very, very time-proof.³²

E. Kryskin, an activist of the democratic movement in Penza, called the no-alternative elections "feudal privileges for power."³³ Seeking to emphasize that the sources of communist as well as fascist regimes were rooted in Asiatic despotism, he also labeled Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot as "Ghengis Khans of the Twentieth Century."³⁴

The Soviet System as a Mode of Thinking

The documents and statements of members of democratic groups contain another interpretation of the Soviet system that was seen as based not only on a certain social structure, but rather on a certain type of political thinking, one that always existed in human society. For example, A. Isayev, the leader of the anarchist syndicalists, identified three types of political thinking—authoritarian, anarchist, and liberal—that determined the specific political ideology and that, being victorious, would contribute to development of the respective type of society. In Isayev's view, the type of thinking is primary in relation to the given ideology, and predetermines the program and specific action of political groups. Isayev supports his judgment by saying:

In the same political situation, people with the same type of thinking would behave in a similar way, irrespective of their political doctrines. For example, the Marxist Mensheviks and Marxist Bolsheviks found

themselves on the opposite sides of the barricades, but the Bolsheviks' allies included people who were either very far from Marxism, such as the Jacobin wing of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, or anarchist communist Zheleznyak who dispersed the Communist Assembly, or General Brusilov. It was the authoritarian type of thinking that brought all those people together in the same camp. Exactly such thinking forged their belief that the "decisive" action of the Bolsheviks was correct, and ideological substantiation of that action was a matter of the least priority.³⁵

Isayev sees the core elements of authoritarian thinking as the following: the belief that power is the only efficient means to reach both large and smaller social objectives; the attitude to the given individuals and even entire groups and classes as to the means to attain the abstract objectives; and the readiness to sacrifice specific individuals for the sake of building the ideal "progressive" human society.³⁶ Exactly such thinking had won in Russia in 1917, and was laid in the basis of Soviet social realities.

There is no doubt that the thinking that served as the basis for the Soviet system was perceived by the members of democratic groups in the most negative terms, i.e., as the least acceptable. Based on such thinking, the authoritarian regime or totalitarianism started to distort the personality, depersonified the human mentality, and transformed human individuals into slaves—not only in terms of their social status, but conscious slaves who were satisfied with their position and considered it quite normal.

This results in a peculiar anti-world that confronts the "normal" society. "In essence, totalitarianism is a phenomenon of mentality rather than being," wrote Democratic Union ideologue A. Yeliovich. "Under totalitarianism, there is no being in the philosophical sense, and it represents the ideal kingdom of non-being."³⁷

Accepting the above social and economic perceptions of the Soviet system, Yeliovich sees its major feature as the absence of "economic sovereignty of the personality, when all people are lumpenized and totally depend on the state structures."³⁸ However, he suggests

"... the authoritarian regime . . . depersonified the human mentality, and transformed human individuals into slaves. . . ."

that such structure produced an entirely new situation in the sphere of mentality where one could see "not only fertile soil for manipulation, but also the basis that makes such ma-

nipulation inevitable." Therefore, totalitarianism, victorious in the USSR, became the absolute evil, the kingdom of Hades, an ideal anti-world, where one could find no positive things, not even the logic typical of normal society.³⁹

Perception of the Soviet regime as an "anti-world" that had changed the people's mentality can be referred to the later period of *perestroika* reforms, when a group of the democrats felt disappointed as they saw that neither the destruction of the totalitarian political regime nor the elimination of the state-class were leading to democratization. In the view of the supporters of this theory, even in the conditions of free choice available as a result of the destruction of the totalitarian empire, the totalitarian personality would

nevertheless choose the new totalitarianism. With that, repudiation of some specific political ideology like communism would not change the essence of the social system and even could be useful for the elite. Yeliovich continues:

Because there is a totalitarian structure of mentality, i.e., because the border between good and evil is erased and the two somehow converge into the same whole while people know that the good is not the same as the evil, there appears a surprisingly organic system that, unfortunately, has very great potential for development.⁴⁰

This, argued Yeliovich, posed a threat even more serious than before to the USSR and the whole world. Furthermore, it became more difficult for the outside world to see the distinction between the good and the evil. While previously the West perceived communism as an enemy, then:

in our country, from everyone—from the Democratic Union through to [hard-line CPSU Politburo member Yegor] Ligachev—one can hear the words “democracy,” “human rights,” “*perestroika*,” and the situation appears in which it is not clear against what the West should protect itself. And we see that in our country people fiercely slaughter one another in the name of diversified understanding of human rights. . . .⁴¹

By this view, as a result of *perestroika*, totalitarianism in the USSR was even consolidated and acquired new anti-communist forms. Having thrown away the communist-style clothes that are so unpopular in the world, totalitarianism acquired even better opportunities to converge with “the prosperous countries of the West which, however, probably are not yet trained more profoundly,”⁴² that tend to take the social democratic course for nationalization of the economy, as well as to get greater influence in the countries of the south, having a system based on the same ethnocentric and nationalist principles.

Characteristic Features of the Soviet System

Notwithstanding the substantial differences in the interpretation of the Soviet system, there were several basic characterizations shared by all or at least most of the democrats. All or some of these features were usually mentioned when some member of a democratic group discussed the Communist regime, Soviet totalitarianism, and so forth. Such features include the following:

- Division of society between the two opposite classes: the rulers or collective owners of property and the rightless ruled;
- Repression: an inherent policy of the rulers preconditioned by the need to secure their domination in the circumstances of lagging ever further behind the outside world;
- The basic defectiveness of such a system as compared to the more efficient Western system; the system itself is seen as the major reason of the country’s crisis;

- The basic similarity between this system, on the one hand, and the totalitarianism of Nazi Germany and especially the pre-capitalist Asian societies, pre-revolutionary Russia in particular.
- The destructive effects that the Soviet system inflicted on human personality, mentality, and psychology.

Based on such characteristics, definitions of Soviet society were widely disseminated in the policy statements of democratic groups throughout the country. While differing in details, the main contents always followed the above formulations.

Methods of Struggle

Analysis of perceptions developed by members of democratic groups concerned with the state and social organization of the USSR provides a key for better understanding of the groups' concrete political actions as well as the strategy and tactics of their struggle against the regime. The logic of struggle by Russian democrats proceeds directly from the logic of their perception of the world, and especially their understanding of the major target of their activities, Soviet realities. Discussion of three aspects of this struggle follows.

First, interpretation of the Soviet system as an ordinary dictatorship, i.e., as a certain form of a political regime, does not provide any insight to the tactics-of-struggle context. Such interpretation underestimated the seriousness of the tasks and led to the belief that the mere toppling and replacement of the regime would immediately bring about the victory of democracy. Such a perception, in its isolated form, almost never existed anywhere in the democratic movement, and in their general tactics the activists were led by the perception of the Soviet system as a more fundamental phenomenon.

Second, the Russian democrats saw the target of their struggle as neither individual dictators nor the political party, nor even as bodies of state power, but as a monolithic political and economic giant: the state-class, which possessed all political and economic power in the country and which restored the order of the distant past, thus slowing down or reversing the nation's development. Thus, any reforms were understood as measures to

deprive this giant of political, economic, cultural, and other powers.

“ . . . however bad the system was, its sudden destruction . . . would bring chaos and transform Russia into a Third-World country.”

In this case, political reforms would withdraw political power first from the CPSU, and then from the whole class of exploiters headed by the party. In the

economic field, this implied elimination of the system of control over enterprises; in the sphere of culture and education, it implied denationalization of art associations, schools, and universities.

The democrats clearly realized that the dominating class would fiercely cling to its privileges, so the process of reforms was viewed as the persistent struggle between state and society, the propertied and the have-nots; only

the victory in this struggle and the elimination of the dominating class would turn the country toward normal development. Therefore, it was not incidental that the Marxist term "to eliminate as a class" (in this context, the bureaucracy), appeared in many documents, such as this from 1989:

Elimination of the *nomenklatura* as a class through election of production and other leaders is the only way to get out of the heavy crisis comparable to that of 1917. Conservative forces confront the reforms, and the outcome of struggle against these forces would predetermine the wealth and poverty of our descendants.⁴³

Various methods were proposed for such elimination. The more cautious democrats, most often of the socialist, social-democratic, or "stateship" orientation, proposed to use the more gradual, evolutionary methods. To support their judgment, they used

to say that however bad the system was, its sudden destruction, followed by the rapid enactment of freedom and a market economy, would bring chaos and transform Russia into a Third-World country.⁴⁴ In this context,

"The view of the USSR as a center of the world's evils . . . was quite popular in [Soviet] educated society. . . ."

they emphasized the need to undertake broad measures of social protection, as the resultant threat of lumpenization of a substantial part of the population might cause a social explosion.⁴⁵

A noteworthy point is that the same danger was mentioned by the authors of the Democratic Union's draft program who believed that "the crisis of totalitarianism can lead to the profound collapse of all party and state structures, and—in the absence of civil society—to restoration of totalitarianism and the beginning of its new cycle." As for a remedy, however, they proposed "to build the infrastructure of civil society, the system of alternative public power" that at some moment could replace the "illegal" and "totalitarian" power and open "the possibility to get out from the blind alley of social development."⁴⁶

Even more radical measures were proposed. For example, the Democratic Union leader V. Novodvodskaya writes in her memoirs that she was ready to prefer the elimination of the USSR with its entire population to the continued domination of totalitarianism, as such a measure would be beneficial to the rest of the world and global development as a whole:

In August 1968 I became the real enemy of the state, army, navy, air force, party, and the Warsaw Pact bloc. I walked in the streets as a clandestine figure in occupied territory. Exactly then I decided that for all those deeds (I already knew about Budapest, too) there was only one measure of punishment: destruction of the state. And now, when it is half-destroyed and lies in blood and mud, when it appears quite feasible that it would die together with the entire people, I feel neither pity nor repentance. Damn the day when the USSR was born! Let it better become a common grave for all of us, rather than, as a vampire, come back from the cemetery at night and suck the blood of those still alive who had never been in the USSR, or have

been there for a short time only and, like the Baltics, have the chance to survive.⁴⁷

Such views should not be seen as an attempt to shock the public on the part of an excited radical. The view of the USSR as a center of the world's evils, elimination of which by whatever means would be useful for all mankind, was quite popular in educated society as well. Novodvorskaya recalls that during a conversation with her school teacher of literature, she heard for the first time that she lived "in a country so terrible that if the atomic bomb was dropped on it and killed us all but at the same time killed the system, this would be a desirable outcome."⁴⁸

Certainly, views as radical as Novodvorskaya's were not heard too often. However, as a result of political developments in the last years of the USSR, the democratic opposition developed increasingly radical sentiments that rapidly shifted in favor of ever more harsh measures to be taken in order to eliminate the totalitarian regime, the regime that was blamed for destructive activities including elimination and standardization of human personality. As the Soviet power structures were perceived as some giant beast whose only mission and natural interests were "to suck blood" of the rightless subjects, and as that perception was based on the unique mix of life experience as well as anarchist-populist, Marxist, and contemporary political theories, the political and more general life situation was seen as a universal confrontation between two poles: authorities and society, democrats and communists, East and West, reaction and progress, we and they.

Such confrontation was addressed from moral positions rather than from the point of the real political art of the possible. "I always believed that there must be 'either, or.' Either they or we. Either the KGB or the possibility to publish a book. Either the party bureaucracy in power, or our freedom," writes Novodvorskaya.⁴⁹ Any concession on the part of the regime, any of its attempts to carry out democratic reforms, were perceived as acts of weakness that had to be used to finish it off, while the regime's weak attempts to demonstrate force were understood as further evidence of its destructive objectives.

Certainly, this does not mean that all participants in the democratic movement have undergone such evolution to the logical finish. However, by the early 1990s the democratic movement was ever more enthusiastic about the idea of the anti-regime decisive struggle. To some extent, this circumstance can throw light on the course of events that followed. The most radical market plans of economic reforms by the Chicago school model, as well as the liberal anti-state theories of the Friedrich Hayek school and the plans to eliminate the "empire" (of which even the CIA could not have dreamt)—all turned out as most popular in the democratic community and were finally approved by President Boris Yeltsin, and not only for political considerations.

Another reason was that the theories were most consistent with anti-totalitarian perceptions of the Russian democrats who sought to eliminate the state-class rapidly, and who considered privatization and the republics' sovereignty as liberation of more and more properties, territories, and people from the power of their adversary. The problems, which emerged later as a

result of this policy—collapse of the state resulted in nationalities conflicts, growth of crime, and other problems—when and if they were discussed in the democratic movement, were seen as a result of preservation of the totalitarian regime, rather than as a possible result of its decisive elimination.⁵⁰

Third, this position resulted in the interpretation of the Soviet system as a mentality that has realized the anti-world on Earth. In the sphere of practical action, advocates of such an approach usually rejected the direct anti-state struggle and called upon the need to change the totalitarian mentality through time-consuming, meticulous work.

Seeing that the direct attack against the regime and even its social fundamentals did not result in any principal changes, the supporters of such views became quite skeptical about Western methods of anti-totalitarian struggle and felt interested in the ideas of moderate populists and social revolutionaries, anarchists, the theories of cooperation of A. Tchayanov, as well as theories of non-violent transformation by Mahatma Gandhi and even in Christianity.

These teachings seemed attractive because they preached the possibility to change human mentality through new forms of social coexistence, mutual assistance, and cooperation. By such views, the new society should grow up from the bottom via the new forms of public self-government, and thus would be based on such social structures and renovated thinking as a good alternative to the status quo. With such an evolution of democratic ideas after the disintegration of the USSR, many democrats started to criticize Yeltsin's policy, the aim of which, in their view, was to leave power with the former *nomenklatura* and to sustain the domination of the former totalitarian stereotypes.

Some such critics, following populist or anarchist ideas, were moving closer to the left movement or to previously criticized ex-official Soviet trade unions, as well as various forms of alternative people's movements like the Greens, self-government committees, or independent trade unions. These groups were seen as the real and visible sprouts of people's self-government that restored the spirit of cooperation, and thus were capable of changing the totalitarian mentality and improving the situation in the country. It is not incidental that today many former anarchist leaders work in the Federation of Independent Trade Unions, a former official Soviet organization, while many former leaders of the socialists and even the Democratic Union openly cooperate with the Communist Party of Russia and other radical groups of communist and even ultranationalist "patriotic" orientation.

Intellectual Sources

While the whole complex of perceptions developed by members of Russian democratic groups is unique, many themes appear quite familiar. This is related to the fact that their style of thinking and other world views did not appear suddenly but represent the aftermath of the evolution, undergone by the earlier existing perceptions under the influence of the new social realities and the infiltration of earlier unknown ideas.

At first approximation, the analysis of the Russian democrats' perceptions about the state and social organization of the USSR leads to the

conclusion that they have emerged as a result of the effects of official Soviet Marxism and contemporary Western ideologies on Russian traditional social theories extant prior to 1917.

Trying to reconstruct the traditional Russian perceptions of the state and state power, many authors pointed to some similarity in the approaches to the Russian state by its critics. According to N. Berdyaev, the ideas of anti-state struggle in Russia first appeared in the period of the church feud. Berdyaev recounts that after the collapse of the Byzantine empire, "the

"The social and religious ideal, the idea of a sacred kingdom, was transferred from the real Russian state into the sphere of ideas. . . ."

Russian people suddenly realized that the Russian Moscow kingdom remained the only Orthodox Christian kingdom in the world and that the Russian people were the only carrier of the Orthodox belief."⁵¹ This perception was

expressed in Philopheius the monk's renowned theory of Moscow being the Third Rome. Nikon's reforms were caused by the crisis in national mentality when the existing state was no longer perceived as a religious ideal. "The people suddenly suspected that the Orthodox kingdom, the Third Rome, was damaged, and the true belief was betrayed. The state power and the supreme church hierarchy were seized by the Antichrist. The people's Orthodoxy breaks up with the church hierarchy and with the state's power."⁵² The social and religious ideal, the idea of a sacred kingdom, was transferred from the real Russian state into the sphere of ideas, but the willingness to bring that kingdom back to Earth was preserved.

Turning to perceptions of Russian intellectuals in the late *perestroika* period, Berdyaev notes that they preserved dissident features, especially the perception of the state as an absolute evil and the willingness to bring about a social and moral ideal in Russia. The idea started to circulate together with socialism, but, according to Berdyaev, its broad popularity in Russia was possible owing to the fact that the theory of the ideal socialist or communist society and the state-directed rejection of capitalism were perfectly compatible with "traditional" social and religious perceptions. In this context, the opposition considered the existing Russian state, counterposed against the ideal, as the evil, against which the struggle was necessary. In the most extremist terms, the idea was expressed by V. Pecherin, a writer and philosopher quoted by Berdyaev: "It's so sweet to hate the motherland, and greedily await its annihilation."⁵³

These conclusions are supported by others such as V. Zenkovsky, who traces the influence of Orthodox Christian social perceptions on the evolution of world views undergone by many ideologues or intellectuals who shared socialist ideas: Belinsky, Stankevich, Dobrolyubov, Chernyshevsky, and Bakunin. This does not mean the borrowing of the *Raskolnik* (dissenters') ideas, but rather the similar pattern of thinking: the extension of the Orthodox social ideal from Russia to the outer world—in this case, the future—preserving the idea of Russia's special role as the most proper country to carry out such an extension. Certainly, it is not incidental that

many ideologues of Russian socialism, discussed by Zenkovsky, were raised in priests' families and received religious education.⁵⁴

With the absence of serious contemporary studies on the ideology of Russian religious dissent and Russian socialist thought, this concept cannot be accepted unconditionally. However, many of its elements would be useful for the present study. Perceptions about the state and social organization of the USSR, shared by Russian democrats of the *perestroika* period, can be interpreted through the prism of preservation of some elements in one of the traditional attitudes toward the state.

The perceptions, developed by members of democratic groups, of the Russian state as an absolute evil and even as an anti-world, counterposed to the social ideal (either to the West or to the future) actually follow the approach of the pre-1917 Russian socialists. However, as was the case with the *Raskolniks*, this does not at all mean any automatic borrowing. On the contrary, these ideas, even developed by the democrats who identified themselves as socialists and social democrats, were based on the rejection of the pre-1917 ideology of radical Russian socialism and especially its most consistent form, Bolshevism. So, in this case it would be correct to discuss only the same structure of approach and the same type of attitudes toward the state.

At the same time, the factor of succession cannot be over-emphasized. The traditional perceptions of the state, which in essence were an integral whole, underwent considerable transformation in the Russian democratic community under the influence of new types of thinking, especially the official Marxist ideology of the Soviet brand and the kinds of liberal Western ideas that infiltrated the USSR. The Marxist approach to the state as a legitimate institution of violence, practiced by the class of exploiters against the exploited masses (the approach most clearly formulated by Lenin to view the pre-socialist state as evil and unjust), was in good concert with the traditional perception of the existing Russian state as an evil.

The Marxist understanding of socialism and communism as a perfect society extended the social ideal to the West or to the future, which was closer to the West than Russia was. This meant a deviation from the Leninist-populist idea that Russia was closer to the ideal than the rest of the world was (Leninist, because Russia represented the "weak link of imperialism," and populist because of Russia's special communal system).

Lenin's interpretation of Marxism, by which it was necessary to destroy the old state, to seize power, and then to build the ideal state, survived in the form of an attitude toward the state as the absolute evil, suggesting the need for its destruction. Interpretation of the social essence of such a state as based on the exploitation of the people by the dominating class is also borrowed from Marxism, though in order to substantiate the idea for the USSR a new class unknown in Marxism was introduced: the *nomenklatura*.

The ideas conventionally called Western liberalism were also stewed in the same pot of perceptions. First, it is necessary to say that the liberal ideas were coming to the USSR in the most simplified propaganda form, emanating from such major sources as Radio Liberty, the BBC, and Voice of America. About 80 percent of the interviewed democrats said that they had regularly listened to those broadcasts.

Another source of impressions about the West was represented by the stories and the Soviet official literature that in opposition circles was most often perceived in the opposite terms. Any official criticism of the West was perceived most positively by the democrats. For example, if the capitalist state was presented by the Soviet mass media as an exploiter ridden with social conflicts, then the future opposition democrats who did not believe the official media thought that the West lived in full social peace and harmony. Exploitation characterized the USSR. Thus, Soviet literature indirectly supported the impressions produced by Western broadcasts. The few democrats who had a chance to visit the West, normally on short-term delegations, saw only the exterior part of the "society of abundance" and looked at the West from an already well-prepared ideological view.

Western liberalism, especially on the ideological and public opinion level, understands democratic society as a social ideal or at least as the best of all existing societies, the one that is capable of evolving into such an ideal. These ideas in their extreme form correspond very well with Russian pre-revolutionary and Marxist traditions. The Russian democrats of the Right moved their social ideal to the West and tried to prove that Western society had become the ideal already. On this point their opinions matched with that of the Right conservatives in the West. Russian socialists and anarchists thought that the ideal was not the contemporary West, but a society of the future, to which contemporary Western society was closer than the Soviet one. Here they agreed with Western socialists and the Left. However, such similarities in opinion could only mislead both sides, since the basis of the ideas of Western and Russian political activists was very different.

The attitude of Western liberalism toward societies and nations, its tendency to see those of them which do not meet their democratic criteria as socially underdeveloped, mixed in the heads of Russian democrats with the traditional Russian idea of the state as an absolute evil. It was not by chance that the most radically critical Western definition of Soviet society as totalitarian became the most popular among Russian democrats, both of the Left and Right, who saw the Soviet state as the absolute evil opposite their social ideal.

Styles of Thinking and the Development of Political Studies in Russia

Studies of the perceptions of different social groups and the whole style of thinking of late Soviet society create new opportunities for a better understanding of Russia's contemporary development. The reason for this is not the basic uniqueness of Russia as opposed to the rest of the world. The creation of such an opposition is itself very common to the traditional Russian style of thinking. The analysis from the styles of thinking viewpoint is based on more general ideas, stressing the diversity of the world, diversity of all cultures not only in time, but in space. It sees as useless the attempts to analyze such huge historical and cultural massifs as Russia, as well as, for example, China, India, or the Muslim world, without studying how the representatives of these cultures see the world, including the part of it from which the scholar who studies them comes.

Without what Mikhail Bakhtin calls a "dialogue of cultures" transferred from studies of history and literature to political science, it is impossible to explain the political life of societies, whose style of thinking is significantly

'different from that of those where politology itself was produced, since the motives of actions of such societies' members could easily be misinterpreted.

Such misrepresentation, among other consequences, may lead to an inability to achieve very practical goals: to predict political development of a given country, or recommend policy options. Unfortunately, even the failure of all political prognoses of the development of the USSR has not led to a clear understanding of the new methodological errors of Western Sovietology. The same authors who only a few years ago predicted the strengthening of the Soviet regime in the mid-1990s, today continue telling us about the so-called struggle between liberals and conservatives in Russia and giving sometimes absurd recommendations to their governments.⁵⁵

Russian politology, which came into existence mostly on the basis of former chairs of scientific communism, is actively copying these outdated West-centered methods of political analysis. This is understandable since Marxism itself, with its quest to find general laws of social development, evolved from rationalism and Hegelian theories. It is closer to Western theoretical sociology and political science than the method of studying the mentality of each specific time and social group, which is based on the idea of the diversity of the world.

“. . . Russian political scientists copy outdated methods from their colleagues abroad even for study of their own society.”

There is a certain abnormality in the fact that Russian political scientists copy outdated methods from their colleagues abroad even for study of their own society (the situation is very different in the fields of history and culture). It would be more natural to use contemporary methods of analysis developed not only abroad but in Russia itself. One can find the sources of the means of studying methods or styles of thinking, the dialogue of cultures not only in German sociology or knowledge or the French New History school, but in the Russian scientific tradition: the works of philosopher Aleksei Losev's theory of myth, the analysis of the iconoclasts by Pavel Florensky, and the ideas of Bakhtin. The method itself was developed and widely used in the USSR by the authors of the Tartu-Moscow semiotic school.

Using this new methodology, political science could achieve more in explaining political realities of the contemporary world. The study of the perceptions of members of the democratic groups in Russia at least gives a totally new set of keys to the understanding of the collapse of the USSR and further political developments in Russia. It does this by finding its roots in the originally developed and widely spread thoughts of the people, in particular their thoughts about the structure of Soviet society.

Notes

1. Michael McFaul, "Why Russia's Politics Matter," *Foreign Affairs* 74 (January-February 1995):1.

2. Pavel Novoselov, *Pravo Golosa*, Information Bulletin of the Krasnoyarsk Committee for Perestroika (Krasnoyarsk, July 1988):17.

3. G. Popov, "S tochki zreniya ekonomista," (O romane Alexandra Beka "Novoe Naznachenie"), *Nauka i Zhizn* (1987):4.

4. "Deklaratsiya ob obrazovanii Pensenskogo fronta v podderzhku perestroiki. Proyekt," *Penzenskiy Grazhdanin* (10 December 1989):10.

5. V. A. Kuzin, "O kirpichakh i fundamentye," *Otkrytaya Zona* (4 February 1988):31.

6. V. Fyodorov, "Put' iz krizisa," *Grazhdanskiy Referendum* 6 (1990):3.

7. The academic and public communities reached consensus on the "totalitarian" character of Soviet society no later than 1989. The evidence is provided by the recently published proceeding of the Moscow conference on Totalitarianism as a Historical Phenomenon, where none of the participants, representing Russia's prominent social scientists and various public groups, expressed any doubts about the very existence of totalitarianism in the USSR before and during the Gorbachev period. All participants proceeded from the common understanding that totalitarianism did exist in the USSR, and thus they simply analyzed its essence. See *Totalitarianism kak Istoricheskiy Fenomen* (Moscow, 1989).

8. *Ibid.*, 155.

9. Milovan Djilas, *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System* (New York: Praeger, 1958).

10. Mikhail Voslensky, *Nomenklatura: The Soviet Ruling Class* trans. Eric Mosbacher (New York: Doubleday, 1984).

11. S. Andreev, *Ural* 1, 1988. Also see S. Andreev, "Struktura vlasti i zadachi obshchestva," *Neva* 1, 1989.

12. Interview with V. Manuilov, Penza, 23 April 1994.

13. "Deklaratsiya Demokraticeskoi Partii," 1989, in *Rossiya: partii, assotsiatsii, soyuzy, kluby*. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov 2 (unpublished, Moscow, 1992), 10.

14. Proyekt programmy partii Demokraticeskii Soyuz, (unpublished) 8-9.

15. V. Krasulya, "Partiya: vchera, segodnya, zavtra. Tezisy k diskussii," *Grazhdanin* 5 (Stavropol, May 1989), 11.

16. V. Nyrko "Programma SDPR" (draft), in *Kuchreditel'nomu syezdu Sotsial-demokraticeskoi partii Rossiskoi Federatsii*. Collected Materials No. 1. (Moscow, Minuralsibstroj, 1990), 45-46.

17. Interview with A. Shubin, Oxford, 26 January 1995.

18. Fyodorov

19. G. V. Plekhanov, "K agrarnomu voprosu v Rossii." *Sochineniya* 15 (1926):31.

20. Plekhanov, "Dnevnik sotsial-demokrata" 4 (March 1906), in *Sochineniya* 15 (1926):31.

21. *Ibid.*, 36.

22. K. A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven, 1957), 440.

23. Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (New York: Praeger, 1966).

24. Voslensky, Chapter 8.

25. "Put' k svobode: Programma sotsialisticheskoi partii," (unpublished draft) 4-5.

26. "Demokraticeskii soyuz: Bulletin soveta partii," (unpublished draft) February 1990, 13-14. This draft was not formally approved and evidently expressed the views of only a portion of the party, which for the purpose of this article cannot be considered as a fact of great significance.

27. For a detailed discussion of the history of the concept of the "Asian mode of production," see, for example, V. N. Nikiforov, *Vostok i vseмирnaya istoriya* (Moscow: Nauka Publishers, 1975).

28. A. V. Meliksetov, *Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskaya politika Gomin'dana v Kitaye (1927-1949)*, (Moscow, 1977).

29. "Put' progressa k sotsial'noi demokratii: Osnova programmy SDPR," (Moscow-Sverdlovsk, 1990), 4.

30. "Platforma kluba 'Demokrat,'" (Vladivostok, 1989), 1.

31. V. Krasulya, "Nashi raznoglasiya," *Grazhdanin* 5 (Stavropol, May 1989):5.

32. Pavel Poluyan, "Ot byurokratii k demokratii," *Pravo Golosa* (Krasnoyarsk, July 1988), 20-21.

33. "Kak penzenskaya nomenklatura sebya samoderzhit," *Demokraticeskoye Obozreniye* 2 (Penza, 16 May 1990).

34. "Zastoinoye natchalo," *Listok Grazhdanskoi Initsiativy* 14 (Penza, 5 December 1989).

35. A. Isayev, "Filosofskiy razmyshleniya o gnusnosti liberalizma i prichinakh, po kotorym intelligentyi chelovek ne mozhet byt' anarkhistom," *Obshchina* 35-36, (1989) 14.

36. *Ibid.*, 15.

37. A. Yeliovich, "Perestroika i psikhooanaliz," *Vpolgolosa* 3 (June 1991):8.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*, 10.

41. *Ibid.*, 11.

42. *Ibid.*

43. "Deklaratsiya ob obrazovanii Penzenskogo fronta v podderzhku perestroiki: Proyekt," *Penzenskiy Grazhdanin* 10 (December 1989):10.

44. Interview with A. Shubin, Oxford, 26 January 1995.

45. For example, this view has become the key essence of the "Basic Program of the SDPR." See *Put' progressa i sotsial'noi demokratii*, Osnova programy SPDR, (Moscow-Sverdlovsk, 1990), 19.

46. "Proyekt programmy partii 'Demokraticeskii soyuz,'" PASK (December 1989), 79.

47. V. Novodvorskaya, *Po tu storonu otchayaniya* (Moscow: Novosti, 1993), 22.

48. *Ibid.*, 19.

49. *Ibid.*, 9.

50. Broadly circulating were the views that the "unprecedented power of the mafia in our country objectively proceeds from the one-party form of government and is fueled by the juices of the super-centralized state economy" [*Grazhdanin* 9 (Stavropol, April 1990):14], and that the "imperial policy of the Center, that ignored the national specifics and suppressed the national identity, has currently aggravated the nationalities issue. . . ." [*Put' progressa i sotsial'noi demokratii*, Osnova programmy DDPR, (Moscow-Sverdlovsk, 1990), 10].

51. N. A. Berdyaev, *Istoki i smysl russkogo kommunizma* (Moscow: 1990), 9.

52. *Ibid.*, 10-11.

53. N. A. Berdyaev, *Russkaya ideya* (Paris: YMKA-PRESS, 1946), 40.

54. V. Zenkovsky, *Istoriya russkoi filosofii* (Leningrad: 1991).

55. The most striking example is in the works of American Sovietologist Jerry Hough.