

The Russian and American Intelligentsia: A Glimpse at Two Intellectual Worlds



Yuri Glazov, born in Moscow, was expelled from the Academy of Sciences and banned from teaching at Moscow University for signing a "petition of twelve" in early 1968. After four years, he obtained permission to leave the Soviet Union. He taught at Boston College from 1973 to 1975 and since then has been professor and chairman of the Russian Department at Dalhousie University.

In recent years, mainly since the moral protest movement was crushed, the activities of Russian intellectuals have received good press-coverage in the West. The exiled Russian intellectuals have given lectures before various North American audiences, have been interviewed frequently on TV and in the press, and have published a long list of books and articles. These voices have described Russia from different points of view, sometimes confusing and even surprising. But as described by them, present-day Russia does not coincide at all with the cheerful image invariably drawn by the Soviet press. Many an American student is eager to visit Russia. But I have not heard recently, at least not since the late Lee Harvey Oswald, of any American who publicly expressed the desire to leave America for Russia in order to help the Soviet people bring "the building of the magnificent edifice of communism to a victorious end". The young Americans do not follow in the footsteps of their fathers who, in the never-to-be-forgotten thirties,

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journeyed to Russia in order to assist the happy people build their "collective farms" and "socialism" in general.

Since Americans have their own dissidents from the established order, especially in the New Left, it seemed, initially at least, that there might be some kinship between them and their Russian counterparts. Gradually, however, it became clear that these two groups of trou-

blemakers had little in common. If American dissidents are mainly pro-socialist and not strictly religious, the majority of Russian dissidents, in my opinion, are pro-religious and nonsocialist, often even anti-socialist. As a rule, the Russian dissidents are looked upon as conservatives in the new world, and the majority of them are unable to understand properly the psychology of American dissidents. Russian dissidents, labeled as radicals in the Soviet Union, are welcomed at first by American conservatives. Some American radicals unwittingly play into the hands of the Soviet ultraconservatives, for example, Angela Davis. Perhaps the surest way to eliminate dissidents in both these countries is to launch the exchange of dissidents along with the exchange of artists and scientists.

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America is the country the Russian people are most eager to know about. The role played by American culture in shaping the mentality of a Russian intellectual is very great. Since one can understand almost nothing about American life from the official Soviet press, the information provided by recent Russian emigrés is highly significant. The wave of Russian visitors to America in the sixties provided probably the only trustworthy accounts since the highly critical reports of Gorky, Esenin, and Mayakovsky. For many Russian emigrés America brought a relative peace of spirit after years of KGB harassment.

Newcomers are struck by similarities between these two great countries. Bureaucracy is discredited, secret intelligence is highly suspected, and eggheads are distrusted by both white collars and hard hats. At the same time, as in the example of dissidents, Russia and America are two worlds with mirror-image correspondence. The Russian culture is oriented to the past, while

America is much more interested in its present and future. Russia is a community-based society where individuals cannot find a place for themselves. American culture is oriented to the individual. Traditional friendship in Russia presupposes the overlapping of souls with actually no personal space whatsoever, while in America privacy is revered and defended by law. Russians are highly emotional, and it takes them some time to understand that to be emotional in America creates a bewildering effect. Russians can be deeply touched by the tears of a man. American boys are taught to keep their emotions concealed. Dozens of similar conventions might be interpreted incorrectly, and in the beginning these confuse newcomers enormously. Initially, Russians feel that Americans are rather dry and reserved.

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The newcomers discover that they lack what this new world needs—fluency of language and efficiency. On the other hand, the new world does not need what the newcomers have in abundance: highly original theories of Russia's evolution and ways of saving the world from Russian danger. The American world wants a continuing détente, despite the warnings of many Russian intellectuals, both inside and outside the country. While these superpower ships were approaching each other, the intellectuals of Russia were almost literally thrown overboard to be used as fenders, lest the ships break each other. There were many surprises in the American culture for the newcomers. More often than not it is in America that Russians finally appreciate their own culture.

They find that classical culture seems to have even less place in America than it does in Russia. The place of "socialist" art in the Soviet culture is occupied in America by commercialized art. Somehow, many "hot" issues in American society do not excite the Russians. The ideas of drug culture, group marriage, and homosexuality are not so important to them—perhaps because long lines of murdered Russians and non-Russians still stand before their eyes and make them think about the future of the tragic world. The Russian newcomers are not yet enchanted by the American intellectual world, what little they know about it, although the period of adaptation to the new and free culture is one of relaxation to the emigrés, no longer chased by the familiar ideological machine.

But Americans are no less confused about the moral stand of the Russian intellectuals, whose position is, in their eyes, too anti-socialist and pro-religious. Americans blame them for having a white-collar complex and being disassociated from their own common people. What can they expect of America, and how can they find a well-paying job, if they do not know English at a time when American Ph.D. graduates are without work? If they applied for Israel, why did they show up in America? Why did so many Russian emigrés cooperate with former fascists or ultra-right-wingers? Why are they looked upon with suspicion by American intellectuals? For what reason did they allow the American establishment to use them? How did it happen, as Günter Grass has said, that those intellectuals who had exposed an independence of thought face-to-face with the Russian authorities could not maintain that independence in the land of the free West? If the Soviet authorities, on the other hand, are so bad and ruthless—and one cannot deny that—what is the use of mailing all these petitions of protest, which are never answered by them but are smuggled to the West and publicized in the rightist press for political reasons? Why did these intellectuals not cooperate with the common people in order to revolt against despotism? What is the whole meaning of the intellectual revolt if these free voices of the totalitarian world are rather often supported by semiclosed institutions of the free countries?

Two intellectual worlds meet, and there is a long list of questions aroused by this rendezvous and, in part, implicitly answered in these notes. Both worlds have to know more about each other. The Russian world will surely lose many illusions while receiving more information about America, partially through those who, after having been forced to leave their country, meet America face-to-face. Meanwhile, America will know more about the Soviet world, where one can find a number of social achievements but never freedom of conscience and thought or the right to make mistakes and find one's own road to meaning and truth. Perhaps, by understanding each other better, as well as by learning from each other's past and present, these two intellectual worlds would feel themselves less alienated. * If youth knew, if age could . . .

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